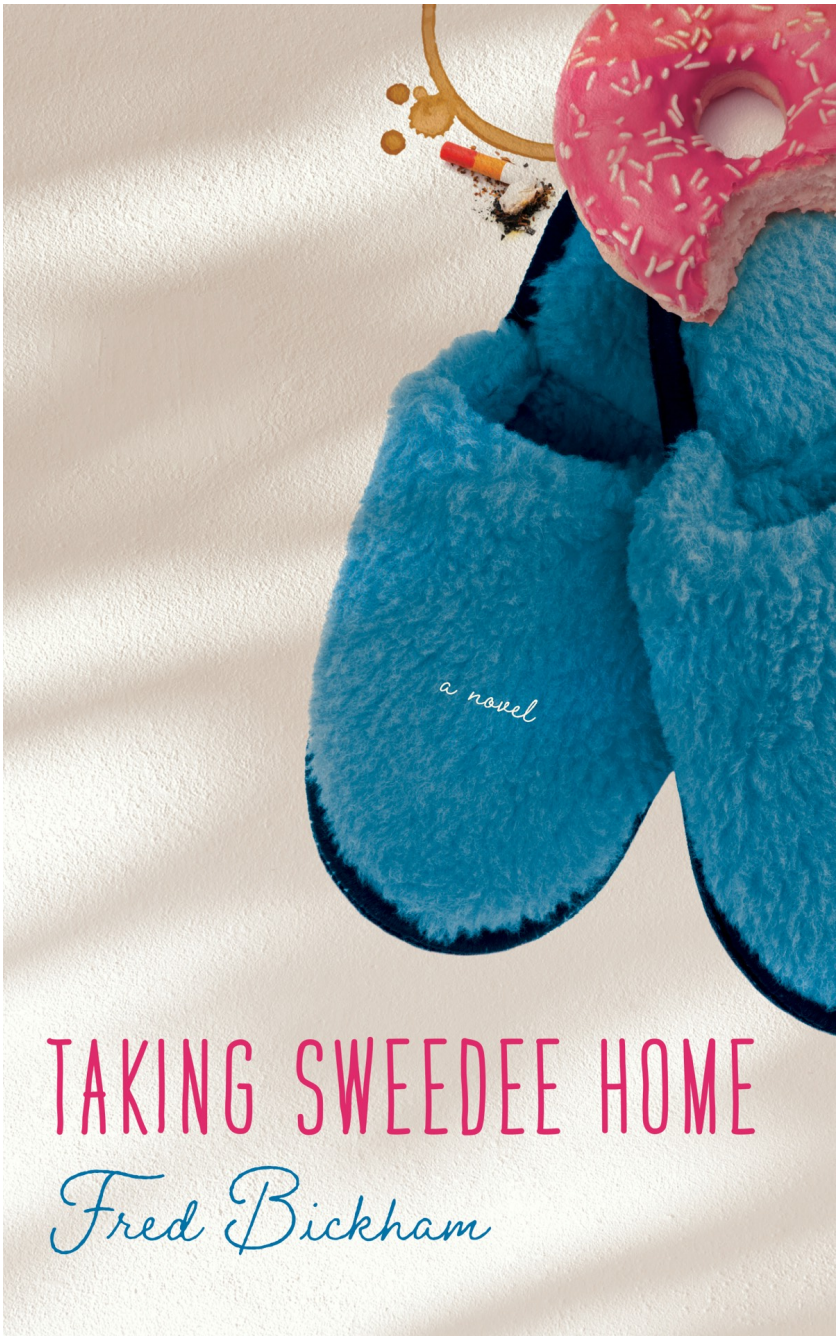

TAKING SWEEDEE HOME

Fred Bickham

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~ To Dayna ~

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The Never-ending Road
About the Author

DEPARTURES

Twin Cedars

Baton Rouge + Onward

1

Chris

Now, don't get me wrong. Like any small-time roadie with big dreams of his own, I loved nothing better than hanging backstage and listening to some old country crooner tell old stories of the road and the wild tales behind some of his all-time hit singles. All that stuff about him breaking up with his no-good ex-whatever, going and getting drunk, then waking up sick as a dog and having to hunt for something to scribble down the first few lines of some soulful ballad …. Really makes you want to go and belt out those heart-wrenching lyrics one more time, doesn't it? Yeah, I'm with you on that one. But take the little number I penned, "The Never-ending Road". The Dillards did, took that baby all the way to the number-four spot on the country music charts, the same year Tom, Joe and Stacie kicked off their reunion tour and bagged a bunch of CMA's like they were candy canes. You'd give a big "hell, yeah!" on that one, too, wouldn't you? But let me say this. Would you still be hugging and kissing that platinum CD, if I told you how the *real* story behind the title-track came straight out of a bathtub?

I mean, come on now! Have you ever tried sitting in an empty bathtub before? Maybe once, perhaps when you were heartbroken and drunk yourself? Well, if so—and there's no shame in that, anyhow, what with the ease of clean-up—then this should sound

like a familiar one: like, how the tub seemed bigger than it really was, and how hard and cold the bottom felt after you'd sat there awhile, not to mention the brightness of the enamel blinding you to the scum coating the tub-surface. Did I scrub hard enough? No? Maybe you're just having a little trouble with the old rear-view. But don't fret. I'm here to help you get back that wonderful feeling you can only find in an empty bathtub. All you've got to do is sit tight for a minute, pull out the stopper, and let all the water get sucked out.

"Get out of there, Chris!"

Now, the first jolt to your memory should come from the pounding of Vent Junior's fist against the bathroom door. I'm talking a wood-paneled door, the kind where one smack sounds like a fire-cracker going off.

"You're gonna get it now! You hear me?!"

Then there's that clinking noise out in the kitchen, like a bottle knocking the edge of a glass. That one would be Mama attempting another daring rescue of her nerves.

"Damn you, Chris!"

But now grab the towel rack, because the real drain-opener is about to kick in, as the engine to Daddy's bass boat buzzes to life then fades away up-river.

"Now see what you done!"

I don't know about you, but hearing my big brother's voice cracking and whimpering outside the door at the sound of the boat leaving and all, well, even now just the thought of it leaves my heart pounding and my gut wrenched. I mean, bad guys and bullies getting hurt meant they had it coming, right? Why then should Vent Junior or any of us have given a hoot about Daddy taking off like that? So what, if he'd wanted to keep certain things hidden from his wife and kids? Wouldn't that mean he was just trying to protect us? What did we have to lose by not knowing all that stuff about the cheating, or the swindling, or the stealing, even?

There I was, just a fourteen-year-old kid with nothing better to

do on that hopeless Saturday morning than sit there, lost in the dull void of the tub bottom—the blank page of my future, and me with nothing to write with—and having to listen to the lunacy creeping in from all sides. I was getting nowhere fast, or about as fast as those dead bugs piled up inside the light cover over the sink. And my big brother was crying, for crying out loud! Let me tell you, there in that empty tub, I started contemplating the possible emptiness of my future: like, how I might never get to play high school basketball or pick guitar with a real band, much less get my license and drive the Suburban and impress the hell out of Judy Cross. But more than anything, I'd never get to know another good day at Twin Cedars. That's right, a never-ending streak of crash and burn, leaving me shedding more tears than Vent Junior could ever muster, let me tell you.

But eventually, my agonizing heart did simmer down as my focus shifted from a would-be hopeless future to the cold reality of my immediate situation. You see, my rear-end was starting to get sore and cold. What I'm saying is, with their tears wiped dry, those eyes of mine were getting snagged on something stuck right there on the tub-bottom.

So, I sniffed and blinked and let those peepers zero-in on what appeared to be a pale strand of something plastered against the white nothingness. With the brush of a finger, that something came to life. Pinched and peeled from the surface, it took on the appearance of fishing line, but thinner. What I drew between thumb and forefinger was none other than a wiry strand of hair, though too long for Mama's and too light for Penny's. And that's not all I discovered. Scattered along one edge of the tub were little clumps of ash. Had Daddy started smoking again? No, this wasn't like him. He would've croaked rather than be caught without an ashtray, if he ever did light up. I mean, he'd even get mad at us for dropping food on the table. No, the evidence was spelling it out for me pretty clearly: some strange W-O-M-A-N had been soaking in our T-U-B recently, and she hadn't even had the decency to R-I-N-S-E

afterwards.

°

JUST TO BE clear about where this heartbroken kid was holding down the tub, that was in the downstairs bathroom of an old Acadian-style house called Twin Cedars, perched on the edge of a forty-acre tract nestled in one bend of the Amite River. After Daddy bought the place and renovated the house, hardly all five of us ever showed up at the "camp" in one go. And on the few weekends when that happened, we would be coming down that old graveled road that turned and entered a broad clearing, curved at the shed painted to look like a barn, and went past an oak from which a rusty basketball hoop hung by a few nails. Mama would then slide the Suburban into the spot next to Daddy's boat trailer under the carport overhang, and before long I'd be racing Vent Junior across the rear deck and down the thirty-foot pier flanked by water the color of used motor oil. And with our cut-offs on, there'd be no stopping at pier's end—never mind Penny covering her eyes and hollering to watch out for snakes! So, if someone else had been abusing the facilities, we would've noticed something. Right? I mean, most days, no one else but Daddy hung around the place. And none of the locals ever bothered to drive back that far, not even joyriders.

But as for the full-time family residence down on Sherwood Forest Boulevard in Baton Rouge? Let me tell you, street traffic was constant, and the rococo-style house had so many rooms that anyone could've gotten lost in it and not been found for a week. It was five-bedrooms and a three-car garage with a pro-style basketball hoop bolted over the middle door. That spot under the hoop, at the head of a cobblestone drive winding through a manicured lawn dotted with palm trees, had served through those anxious teen years as my personal launch pad every Saturday morning after MTV.

On any summer weekend in ‘87, you would’ve had no trouble finding me, this scrawny teenage dude in a “Keep on Truckin’” t-shirt, faded jeans and Nikes, getting his bike ready in the right-hand garage for another excursion into the surrounding neighborhoods. Like I said, all I wanted was to get as far away as possible from the madness, but not so far as not to get back in time for dinner. I had my ten-speed seat-down on the concrete and Restless Skye’s latest grinding away on the boom-box. I’d slipped off the chain, shot some grease into the nipple on the rear axle, set the bike back up, pumped the tires, re-geared the chain, applied a wrench to the nuts under the seat and handle-bars for adjustment purposes, and was ready to mount for take off, when the side door popped open.

“Hey, cream pie! Mama says to get your butt in here and help me with this ice chest. We’re going up to the camp for dinner.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, stupid. Right now. So, stop playing with that stupid bike and come on.”

Remember Vent Junior? Yeah, that was him giving his best impression of a bully. Picture a high school sophomore with an ear-ring, a crew-cut, and a big mouth smeared with the remains of an ice cream sandwich, and you’ve got my brother pegged down pretty well.

Penny, on the other hand, was as thin as a rod-and-reel, with freckles she tried hiding with makeup but didn’t even come close.

“Penny’s not coming this time?” I asked Mama in the kitchen.

Vent Junior answered, “Naw! She’s gone to some stupid pool party. Boy, is she gonna miss out.”

“Why isn’t she having it in our pool?”

“Because, cream pie, it’s our pool and not theirs. She didn’t want to get suckered into coming with us to that ‘gawd-awful, filthy, disgusting’ camp of ours. Ooh, my!”

Mama was tearing off a sheet of foil to cover the barbecued chicken. That summer, her hair had stayed short from regular trips to the salon, and her waist trim from even more desperate visits to

the spa. “There’s nothing wrong with your sister trying to enjoy herself away from college and family. She hasn’t seen her friends in months.”

Vent Junior added, “Yeah, she says she’s tired of school and us and the river and wants to hang out more with that dope-head Rick. Daddy doesn’t like him, so she goes and hangs with him anyway.”

“Your daddy just has high hopes for Penny,” Mama replied. “Rick’s a nice boy, don’t get me wrong. A bit slow, though, but nice.”

“Daddy said he’d disinherit her, if she ever went and married the loser.”

“Vent Junior! Quit talking like that. He didn’t really mean it. Your daddy’s just been under a lot of stress lately.”

I opened a can of soda and asked, “Is he already up there?”

“Of course,” said my brother. “Where’ve you been all this time? Daddy’s always at the camp on Saturdays. And Sundays. He’s gonna always be at the camp. Don’t you get nothing?”

Mama finished wrapping the pan and tossed the foil box onto the counter. “Well, I get one thing. You two have been stalling long enough. That ice chest isn’t going to load itself.”

“Lend a hand, cream pie.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Cream pie, cream pie, with whip topping on the side.”

“Mama!”

Don’t pay too much attention to my brother. He’d been trying to act tough ever since first saying how he was going into the Army after graduation.

Now, this was only the third or fourth time I’d been to Twin Cedars, the family “camp”, but I couldn’t wait. So, we three piled into the Suburban and headed up Sherwood. Driving that street’s scarred and cracked pavement, mended here and there with asphalt, we came to the light at Choctaw Drive, just before the railroad crossing. I remember seeing a string of rusty grain cars sitting a little ways down the track. They weren’t going anywhere,

unlike us. After the light changed, we were off again.

Then came the turn onto Greenwell Springs Road, with that small graveyard tucked in one corner and bordered by azaleas. I studied its half-submerged, mildew-stained concrete tombs—which bore no inscriptions, mind you—and for the umpteenth time, wondered about such an isolated location in an area of houses and small businesses, the work no doubt of some pretty suspicious bungling. Probably just a bunch of nobodies, I figured then, tossed out and left to sleep on a street corner. Thankfully, I never had to worry about that happening to any of us.

We were on Greenwell Springs Road now, four lanes hugging a neatly trimmed median. The sidewalks were just as trim, and the lawns must've been kept mowed year-round. Crossing the Comite River, little more than a stream at that juncture, I spied some crooked branches and roots sticking up like knobby knees from the water and its steep banks. Maybe they should've called it "Comite Creek". Now, where we were going, *that* was a river.

Beyond Central, the four lanes merged to two, all signs of suburbia faded, and long oak branches from both sides weaved into a green canopy over the roadway. Kind of reminded me of those plantation tours along the Mississippi. Then, after crossing Magnolia Bridge Road, we came to Greenwell Springs proper, where the famous hospital stood amid spacious grounds shaded by pines and bordered with azaleas. Brick-columned gates welcomed sick people up its circular drive. But not us, thankfully. And just past the hospital, and close to the road, stood that small abandoned grocery store that made me wonder whether it had ever been used for anything but a boarded-up backdrop for weeds.

By this point, the road had become Highway 37 and continued through more green archways, with little or no shoulders and the sides falling off into deep narrow ditches. Front yards pressed right up to the pavement to meet us, while fields of yellow clover, grazed by Guernsey cows with tails swishing pendulum-style, stretched far back toward distant woods. A huge horse farm lay further up that

way, a white wooden fence running its entire perimeter, with a dirt track which, somebody said, had once been used for racing. Most driveways were graveled, and I counted more trailers than houses.

Just passed Indian Mound, Vent Junior started fiddling with the knobs on the radio, till the dial landed on some guy talking.

"Oh, leave it there," Mama said. "I want to hear the news."

Well, there was this stuff about the upcoming presidential race and Iran-Contra and the Space Shuttle tragedy, before the guy finally said, "In other news, Atlanta authorities are continuing to gather evidence against the lead suspect in the 1975 case involving stolen paintings from a private museum. The manhunt goes on, as police search the streets for Susan Edith Feathers, a missing employee from the museum who was present when the rare paintings were found to have been switched with forgeries. The total estimated value of the art work, if recovered, could be worth as much as 50 million dollars."

"50 million!" my brother hollered. "Wow! Those things must've been painted with gold or something."

"It's not what they're painted with," Mama said, "but their rarity that makes them so valuable."

I scooted forward to insert a curious point. "Mama, why did they call it a manhunt, if they're looking for a woman?"

"You dodo!" Vent Junior said. "Haven't you been watching Magnum P.I.? That's just to make her think they're looking for a man. So, she gets to feeling safe and starts strutting around, saying, 'Ha, ha! I'm a woman. You can't touch me.' And then they nab her, and it's like, 'Yeah, we fooled you, lady.' Ain't that right, Mama?"

"I think that's just a technical term they use for all criminals, honey."

"Yeah, the dumb ones."

"I don't think she's so dumb," I replied with unusual boldness. "You have to be pretty smart to steal stuff worth millions."

"Well," Mama said, "she's eluded them so far. I have to say she's not your ordinary kind of lady, that's for sure."

Yes! Somebody on my side for a change.

"See, cream pie," Vent Junior said, trying to steal my thunder. "She's not like most gals. She's different. Why, I bet she could be hiding anywhere."

By this time, we'd reached the turn-off, about a mile before the Amite River bridge. As we wound our way through the woods, the other camps began to appear: first, the Davises' eighteen-foot trailer at the end of a narrow clearing, then Foster's tin and plywood shack perched on piers. Next came the one that used to belong to the Blombergs, a pink two-story pre-fab with a balcony off the upper floor side, like something your grandma would love. It had been put up for sale shortly after Daddy bought Twin Cedars. That morning, however, the "For Sale" sign was nowhere to be seen. Then came our place, last stop, right where the road crooked and cut through trees and brush before opening onto the front clearing.

On the far side of a broad field of bahia, the house stood with its long gabled roof and full-length front porch. It was sided with unpainted cedar—even the roof shingles were cedar—with an extension forming the overhang on the left end. In the spot next to where Mama pulled in, the boat trailer stood empty, which meant Daddy had his pride and joy out on the water. But without our cut-offs on and with that ice chest to tote, the race along the pier would have to wait. So, after wrangling it through the kitchen door and letting it plop onto the floor, we made a bench out of the chest while Mama put the pan of chicken on the stove.

"Oh, don't leave that in here," she said. "Take it on out to the deck."

With much groaning and straining, we managed to hoist it off the floor, and that without argument. But just then, two things grabbed my attention. The first was a bottle of Old Coyote and two glasses left sitting on the counter, an arrangement that made me wonder whether Daddy had company. Mama spotted it, too. She had the bottle in hand and was giving it a shake, when thing number two made its entrance. First, a door down the back hallway

slammed, then Daddy appeared around the corner with this frightful look that spelled out N-O-T G-O-O-D. You could always spot J Ventress North by the thin slits through which his eyes peered. But now they were as wide as quarters.

"What are y'all doing here?" he growled, grabbing the bottle from Mama and planting it back on the counter.

"Hey, honey. We thought we'd surprise you with a picnic. Are you hungry?"

"You don't get it, Evelyn. You just don't get it."

"Get what, dear?"

"Didn't I tell you not to come up here unless I was with you?" He then stretched his neck, looking out the back door at something.

Mama looked, too, and said, "I know that, Vent, but we hardly see you anymore."

"This is great. Just great!" He was pacing back and forth for some reason.

Mama said, "I don't see why you're so upset. Why can't we try to be a family for once? It takes more than one to keep it together."

"Where's Penny, then? Is she with that boy Rick? Why I oughta…."

"Don't you dare talk like that about your daughter, especially in front of the boys. If you stayed around home more, you wouldn't be thinking such foolishness. Stop getting all fired up over nothing, Vent."

"Fired up? You want to see fired up? Well, here's me firing up the boat and getting the hell out of here."

"Vent North, where're you going?"

"And don't follow me neither."

"Vent, what is wrong with you?"

The back door slammed behind Daddy, but then Mama whipped it back open and was hollering "Vent!"

By this time, I'd dropped my end of the ice chest and was headed down the front hallway. I had no idea where I was going, so I just slipped into the bathroom, locked the door, crawled into the

tub and put my head between my knees. That's when Vent Junior started pounding off some of those "fire-crackers", and hard truths were making themselves known through tear-free eyes.

°

WHY DID I start with Twin Cedars? you might ask. I'd had plenty of crushes back in high school, Judy Cross for one—at least, until she got pregnant and eloped with the star football receiver. But to fall in love with that old clapboard house on the Amite River? And as far as some crooner writing a tear-jerker of a song about how his gal up and left him for his best buddy, you can bet it cut pretty deep knowing the good times we'd had were really gone for good. The thing is, those few good times we did find at the North family camp had meant more to me than all the money in the world. Not even having my own bank account at fourteen could replace catching catfish by lantern light, or sitting on the pier and cheering as a water-skier took a tumble, or learning to drive the boat and almost capsizing it on the first run, or spotlighting coyotes and deer in the brush, or those Sunday cook-outs on the deck with Uncle Mack and Uncle Dick trading stories about life on a naval cruiser parked off the coast from Saigon.

And even if I couldn't have things again the way they had been, and as hard as I tried forgetting the house and the pier and the dark river water, those memories kept clogging up my brain, sticking there like … well, like used motor oil, with never enough kerosene at hand to cut them loose. Yeah, I was hurt. I was sore. And perhaps, if you stopped taking your SUV to Qwik-Lube and just crawled under an old Datsun with a socket wrench, you might find yourself going where I did during the next five years.

That second fall after high school, I would've had my mind made up to take off at last, if it weren't for that solitary place back there on the river tugging on the shirt tail of my heart.

Shirt tail of my heart? Sounds like a good title for a song, don't

you think?

"Chris! Chris! Where's that boy gotten to?"

Let me fill you in, before I go back to giving Daddy a chance to find me. You see, my plans for studying music at the university had gotten tossed after Daddy decided I needed something more practical like business school. So, I bowed and trudged through a year at BR Technical.

Vent Junior had joined the Army like he'd said and been shuffled off to Saudi Arabia for Desert Storm. Then he came home with a new attitude and a new bride, and Daddy put him to work managing the family business.

Penny had dropped out of LSU, married her loser boyfriend Rick and run off with him to Lake Charles. Rick claimed the oil business was getting ready for another boom, and he wanted to be first in line for when the rigs started pumping again. Yeah, right!

Mama hired and fired three maids, then started staying up later than usual, nursing a bottle and glass by the pool.

Daddy entered semi-retirement and established an outpost at Twin Cedars—along with a certain someone whom I was yet to meet.

I just couldn't stand it any longer. I had to get out of there quick. So, one afternoon in '92, I kissed BR Technical adios and sucked my bank account dry. I got my Datsun loaded, gassed up, tire pressure checked, dented fenders run through an auto-wash on Florida Boulevard, and oil and filter ready for the engine. Some classic Bob Seger was wailing away on the car stereo, and I'd just gotten the last quart to pouring, when one of the electric garage doors started lifting with a hum.

"Chris! Where've you been, boy? No wonder you couldn't hear me, not with that racket of yours playing. Listen, when you're done with that, I need you to follow me up to the camp."

"Right now? But …"

"Yes, right now. So finish up whatever you're doing and meet me up there."

I shook out the last drops of oil and wiped my hands. “Daddy, we need to talk.”

“Not now.” He was down the drive and had the truck door open. “When I get there, I want to have a few words with you. Hear?”

No point in boring you again with the details of that last trip to Twin Cedars. After all, while driving my car up 37 ahead of Daddy, my mind was so focused on getting away from him and everything else that the trip hardly registered anymore, except for that portion of the highway where the trees formed the archway. More like a tunnel this time. Or maybe even a gun barrel—and me, the bullet. I was cocked and ready to exit the muzzle, when another force came along and disengaged the trigger, and like a bad habit, ejected the car down that graveled road to its dead-end.

I decided I would stay just long enough to get some things off my chest. So I pulled up next to the shed and walked toward the house. Except for the river’s churning, the place was quiet. I left the front door open, flopped down on the sofa, and flipped on the satellite dish, thumbing through the channels, not caring what was on. I heard his truck coming up the drive, the door slamming, and him hollering, “Chris! Get out here and help me with this.”

I sighed, punched the remote and stomped onto the porch.

Daddy had a large flat box sitting edgewise on the tailgate. “Come on, boy. Quit stalling.”

“Daddy, I need to …”

“Help me tote this to the bathroom.”

I took one end and began walking backwards, but my heart just wasn’t in it, and I nearly let my end slip at the steps.

“Watch what you’re doing. I swear, boy, you’re not being much help today.”

“Well, I’m trying.”

“Then try harder.”

I gripped harder and tugged harder. But apparently that still wasn’t enough.

“Slow down now,” Daddy said.

“Well, which do you want? Slow down or try harder?”

He opened his mouth, but then shut it and sighed. A vein swelled in his neck. “Are you ever going to listen to what I say? Now, just get it through the door and set it down. Easy now!”

After we’d gotten it settled in the front hallway, Daddy shoved passed me, entered the bathroom and got the water running in the sink.

I could tell he’d been busy in there—open cans of paint, empty caulk tubes and bits of wood were everywhere. The medicine cabinet was out of the wall and sitting on the floor which had its tile ripped up. Daddy dried his hands, picked up a tape measurer, and held it against the wall over the sink. Then, he measured the hole left where the medicine cabinet used to be, over the hamper door.

“Yeah, that’ll do,” he said.

The tub was coated with sawdust, but no more ashes or hairs in sight. Also, Daddy had installed a border of blue ceramic tile around its edge.

“Hand me that,” he said, pointing toward the door. I found a framed flower print standing behind it. He took the thing from me and said, “Only your mama could pick out a piece of crap like this. But I finally found a use for it.”

He held the framed print over the hole in the wall for a few seconds, then set it down. “Let’s go in the kitchen for a moment. I want to talk to you.”

“Daddy, I really need to go.”

“You’ve got nothing that can’t wait. Just sit down in there and listen to me for awhile.”

I plopped down in a chair at the table and stared out the window. Daddy propped himself against the counter. I could feel his eyes on me, but I wasn’t going to return the compliment.

“Listen, boy. You need to start growing up soon. I can’t keep babying you.”

“Well, I don’t need your babying. I’m grown enough to take care

of myself."

"Then what's this I hear about school?"

Had they called him already about my quitting? I knew I was in for it then.

"Your teacher says your grades are slipping. Now, I don't want to hear anymore about how college would've been better for you. I've told you, you need something to fall back on, so there's no excuse for slacking."

"But I'm not interested in accounting. Alright? I already told you that."

"Don't give me none of that. You know the plans I have."

"Yeah, *your* plans," I muttered.

"Listen to me. You and your brother are to take over the shop when I retire. Now, Vent Junior's good with people, and that's why I made him manager."

"Yeah, the good little general."

"But he don't know jack about keeping the books straight, and that's where I'll need you. So, you better start picking up some interest."

"Well, what if I say no?"

Again, he started to speak, but only let out a sigh. He came and sat down opposite me. "Look, Chris. There're some things you need to know about the business, some things that need taking care of, for the family's sake, but I can't explain them right now. You'll just have to trust me and do what you're told."

"Well, I'm tired of being told what to do. So, now I'm getting the hell out of here."

I was out of the chair. First step completed.

"What? Where? Where are you going?"

"To Nashville. I'm going to Nashville. That's right. I'm going to live my dream, not yours."

Next step? I had my hand on the door knob.

But then he just laughed. "Boy, what kind of fool idea gave you that notion?"

"It's my idea, and I'm going to make it happen."

The door was open. Just one more step to go.

"Not with my money you ain't," he said.

"Fine! Then keep your money. I don't want any of it."

I was ready to slide into that next base, but I just had to get something else out. "In fact, I wish it'd been North Brothers instead of Brown's that caught fire that night. We'd have been a lot better off without it." But still not far enough. "And another thing. I hope sleeping with that floozy of yours was worth all the pain it caused Mama."

Man, I was smoking, heading out that door, the same one Daddy had used five years earlier to give his family the old heave-ho. Yeah, I'd shown him all right.

"Hey!" he barked. "Who do you think you are? You come back here, boy. I'm not through."

"Well, I am!" I barked back, heading out the carport and down the drive.

But Daddy caught up quick. "You listen here, boy!" His fingers gripped my arm. We struggled a bit, before I tore loose.

"Get your damn hands off me!" I screamed. "I ain't your boy no more!"

His face was on fire, and his eyes lit up like sparklers. Then, stepping forward, he shoved me. I mean really hard, too. "Get out of here, then!" And like that wasn't enough, he just turned around and headed back. Not even another word.

But I didn't care. I jumped in my car and peeled out of there. Gravel must've been flying everywhere. And if some of it hit my old man, it was no matter to me.

•

THERE I WENT, nineteen and busting loose. I took that old Datsun of mine and headed straight for Nashville. OK, OK, so no one wanted to hear my songs or guitar playing. There were still plenty of tables

to bus at the Rose Garden, at least until a few broken dishes later a buddy steered me into a job as a roadie for Sonny Talcum's band. But after one tour, I'd had enough of sleeping in no-frill motels and crowded buses, and of waking up in a different town every night. It was better than camping out in my backseat, which I did a lot of, after leaving home. But there were those mindless take-downs and set-ups for each gig, so many that I probably could've done it in my sleep, which I got so little of. So I said, "See ya!" and settled in a back-street trailer on the outskirts of Birmingham while tending bar at Mott's. The few dollars and cents I made there kept getting stretched thinner and thinner. But I wasn't about to phone home, I could tell you that. No, sir. I wouldn't go begging to my old man for a hand-out. No, sir. I'd made myself clear to him, and he'd done the same. Yes, indeed.

After a few too many screwed-up drink orders, I took another job as a roadie, this time with the Dillards. The pay and sleeping accommodations were a little nicer, and the gigs more fun to work though just as back-breaking. Life on the road wasn't half bad. I kept that up for a few years and figured I'd finally gotten all those oil stains out of my noggin, when around 2:30 one morning the phone rang. It woke me out of a deep sleep and left my head spinning. Boy, did it spin! Probably the worst thing that could've happened to a dude who'd been wrapping cable and toting amplifiers for four weeks, then after getting in and partying with his girlfriend had just shut his eyes an hour earlier. Like, every time my mind got settled somewhere, something else had to come along and give it a one-eighty twist. With that one phone call, I found myself looking straight back down that old graveled road, with those words I'd said to Daddy finally catching up with me, pronto. Like the drag from an eighteen-wheeler on the interstate, the things I'd said kept shoving me right out of the passing lane of my future and onto the off-ramp of yesterday.

And there it was again, flashing like a mile-high neon sign: that lazy Louisiana afternoon sun bouncing off that steep cedar-shingled

roof poking up back there among the pines by the river. And let me tell you, it took everything I had to keep hoping I'd bought enough gas to get me there in time.

2

Sweedee

12:01 AM SUN

So, is this thing on? Must be. The little green light blinked. Guess that means it's on. Better work! Nothing else around this dump does. So, what to say? Let's see. Better talk to someone, or people will think, "Crazy!" or something. Not! So, how about Ruby? Guess she won't mind.

Hey, Ruby, honey! It's me, your mother, Sweedee. Yeah, this old gal's still kicking. Just been hanging out here in the boonies for a bit. Not much to do around here, but it's not bad. Food service could be better. I like mine straight out of the can and ready to munch, no tools required.

So, do you ever, you know, miss your old mom? Course not! What am I thinking? You've never even met me before. But, all the same, just wanted to say, "Hey!"

Well, just sitting out here on the balcony, looking through the trees at the stars. Man, there are so many of them. The Big Guy's been real busy, hasn't he?

He gave me this place. Vent, not the Big Guy. Well sure, Big G had a hand in it, too, but Vent was the one who set me up in this dump. J Ventress North. Don't know what the "J" stands for. Not

even sure why he set me up here to begin with. Maybe he just likes the company every now and then. Now, don't go thinking what you're thinking, because it's not so. Meaning, your old mom's not been whoring around, OK? It's just that Vent understands me and me him. He likes being generous, so no complaints here. Anyway, about the place: it's this little two-story job surrounded by all these trees, and there's a river out back, too, churning and swishing away in the dark. A nice breeze is coming through, not too chilly. You know, from up here you can see Vent's place. That's his kitchen light over there. Probably getting himself a late snack. Would go over and say "Hey!" except the trail's dark. No telling what kind of critter might slip up. Vent says the moccasins usually stay close to the water, but you never know when one'll get bored and come looking for fun. Even in the daytime, gotta carry a broom handle, those squirrels can get pretty ugly sometimes.

Well, that's about it for now. Guess it's time to turn in. Nothing else to say. Well … there was something else. Should've said it before, but never could think of the right words. So, it'll just have to be said anyway. Well, just wanted you to know, that's all, that, um … Just wanted to say that … um … I, uh … I'm sss… Aah! Damn it!

6:46 AM SUN

6:46? Sun's not even up yet. This stupid thing must be wrong. Man, that was the weirdest dream. Was in this house, you see, and it was moving and some kid was driving and singing and there were these people after us and one of them was trying to tell me something and then I was out of coffee and couldn't find my lighter and … well … that was a weird dream. Man! Knew something was off with that leftover yogurt. Well, night Ruby.

10:54 AM SUN

You know, Ruby, this peanut butter isn't half bad. Better than that

old crummy yogurt from last night. That's life, you know. The yogurt, that is. Not the new stuff. That's all mixed up. The way they used to sell it, that's the point. You see, all the good stuff was way down there at the bottom where you were too stupid to look in the first place, because you were too busy swallowing all the crap on top. So, there—life and yogurt. Yeah! Should tell that one to Vent, he'd get a kick out of it. Maybe should write it down. Could write a book. Boy, some book! But, nah! Best work's done while thinking. But can't think on a full bladder, that's for sure. Gotta go, honey.

1:02 PM SUN

Well, he's dead. So, big deal!

1:04 PM SUN

No, it's not a big deal. Don't know where that came from. But it is a big deal, to me, at least. Must've been crazy, thinking it could never happen. But there it is. Meaning, there he was, just lying there. Poor Vent! He's gone. And there's nothing else to say about it. Well, there is, but not now. Maybe later.

1:04 PM SUN

OK, so what? I loved him. So there. I was in love with him. That's where this old gal screwed up. She fell in love with the man. So, what's a woman to do, seeing the man she loves lying on the floor like that? So, she freaked. Couldn't help it. And ran, as usual. Ran like a wet rat. Well, maybe not that slow, but those were some fast feet for sure. And for some stupid reason they were running for the road. What the Helen-of-Troy were they thinking? It's never been that way. Always the trail. But, no. Had to turn and go straight into the woods. Crazy, for sure. It was like a maze in there. Don't let anybody kid you, Ruby, in the woods, trees look all the same. And

after getting out of that tangled mess, I looked up and there's Vent's house again. So, I just ran around the shed, that's all. No, didn't run. Limped. One of my slippers had come off. But there was no going back for it, can tell you that. Finally, the trail … then here.

What's with the running? What's the big deal? You've seen one dead guy, you've seen them all. Saw plenty on the streets—guys that nobody cared about, just crawling somewhere and dying. That's what happened to Rembrandt. One of the masters, just crawled into a corner and croaked. But who really cared? They sell his stuff for big bucks, but do they really care about the man? And how about Van Gogh? The guy went crazy and shot himself. Now, they stick his work on the auction block, someone makes a hundred mill, and suddenly he's somebody. But no, not while he was kicking. And now, Vent North. Who'll care about Vent now that he's gone? He was no Rembrandt or Van Gogh, but he knew his canvas alright. Just wish there was something more to be done for him. Oh, Vent!

1:16 PM SUN

So, how long's it been? An hour maybe? Been sitting here awhile, that's for sure. Even lost count of the cigarettes. Look at me, still shaking. Can't even empty the freaking ashtray. Listen to me, cursing and all. But who can blame me at a time like this? Well, the Big Guy maybe, but bet even he says a few doozies now and then. And he's not scared, sitting up there on his big throne and all. Probably even got old Vent checked into his mansion by now. Damn it, Vent! Why'd you have to go so quick? Couldn't you have just gotten sick and lingered awhile? It would've made it easier, given me something to hang onto before having to let go.

And no, it wasn't the money or the fancy digs that mattered. Just you. You were the first man this old gal ever really loved that cared that much in return. Yeah, there was your wife and kids, and it'd be a sin to love you and all. Listen, Ruby, honest to G, I prayed

everyday for the Big Guy to forgive me for loving Vent so. And my knees are still sore.

1:43 PM SUN

Well, guess it's been long enough. Gotta call someone, especially before he starts stinking up the place. Can't go back over there, so it'll have to be from here. Man, haven't used a phone in years. Vent always said to dial 911 if anything happened. Don't know who that is around here, but guess they'll come. We're so far out here, can't even get good chlorinated water. Well water! Might as well be drinking from the river.

1:47 PM SUN

Damn it! Forgot. Phone's dead. Don't know why Vent thought old Sweedee could handle a damn phone bill, let alone a credit card—which is expired! Never used it for much except buying books and things. Nothing but books—books and crummy magazines and other useless crap.

So, now it's back over there to make the call. Another cigarette first. Maybe some more coffee. Coffee! What's coffee at a time like this? Sorry, Vent. Should be more considerate, but no. Never have been. Always had to be tough. Gotta be tough in this life. Gotta kick butt every now and then, even if it's my own. Just wouldn't be me. Gotta be me, gotta be Sweedee, gotta get tough. Gotta go over there and make that call. Just let me finish this cigarette.

2:04 PM SUN

OK, so had two more, but that's it. Going now, Ruby. Going over there to make that call. But what to say? "He's dead? Come get him?" No, no, no! Gotta get a grip. Been through worse than this and survived. So, here goes. Big G, give me strength. If you see me

through this, things'll change. You'll see. Even help out the next person that shows up, just like Vent did me. In trouble and didn't know it, and there he comes bailing me out. Owe it to him, to help the first person that comes along. Yes, sirree. Now, to make that call. Damn it, Vent! Why'd you have to put the phone in your kitchen and then die right next to it?

Still, what to say? It'll have to be anonymous, that's for sure. Just his name and where he's at. Right? That's easy enough. Then hang up and head straight back here. They'll never know. No one will. Just old Sweedee, like always. But what then? No money, no phone, barely enough food to feed a rat. And they'll be shutting off the power pretty soon. Knew that one was coming, what with the due date past. But Hickory Dickory, this old gal's lived on less and she'll do it again. Just wish Vent were here to make it easier. It's just you and me now, Ruby. You and me. And nobody's ever gonna separate us anymore, not even if the Lord himself comes back to get me.

3

Chris

Like Vent Junior had said years before: Daddy would always be found at the camp.

"OK! Everybody grab a pole! Easy now!"

They looked like roustabouts, the dudes that always came out at the end of the circus to take down the big top, letting you know the show was over.

I was watching them, sitting under a pine tree near the entrance to Twin Cedars, and picking a few strings on ol' Judy, my guitar. And they couldn't just drop it straight, you see. They had to haul it to the side to dismantle it, metal rods and all. Because of the hole, that is, the thing which had served up to a point as the main attraction and now remained on stage awaiting its due compensation. Even the tent had done its part, keeping the sun off the spectators. But now with the lead actor having taken his bow and the audience wandered over to the house for cake and coffee, time for the tent to fall, as well.

Lynn had invited me, too, but I begged off. Her consideration even extended as far back as that late night call, always trying to keep me in tune with things. Who else would've bothered to contact the youngest and tell him when the funeral would be, much less where the private burial service would be held, or even that Daddy

had been that sick? It had to be sweet little ol' Lynn, out of the whole bunch, who'd still held onto enough decency to do the honor. And she was married to Vent Junior of all people. Go figure!

After the roustabouts from the funeral home had gotten the tent bagged and thrown in the truck bed, they went to work folding up the ring-side seats. I say "men," but one was this skinny Black kid in tank-top and shorts who stayed close to the old Black dude in overalls. I think he was his grandson or something. There was this young White dude, as well, who left his shirt unbuttoned and didn't look near eighteen, kind of wiry and nervous-like, too. Watching over the whole crew was none other than the ringmaster himself, Mister Joe, who sometimes lent a hand with the chairs, but mostly kept barking orders to the other rousties.

Only Vent Junior would be so cheap as to go and hire a local-yokel funeral home instead of an upscale version out of Baton Rouge.

"Vent reckoned Baton Rouge would be too far out of the way," Lynn had told me over the phone, right after I'd asked, "Why the camp?" She then said how it'd really been Daddy's idea to be buried at Twin Cedars. That in itself must've given my brother reason enough to extort some sort of compromise out of the deal.

Lynn remained so sincere and apologetic about the call, too, saying how at first she'd misplaced my number, then how she'd gotten so busy with the arrangements she couldn't sleep till she'd found that last Christmas card I'd sent. But how could I blame her? It was hard getting mad at Lynn. And yet, hearing something in her voice over the phone, I knew I had to throw on some clothes and head right down here. Believe me, not much ever got Lynn down and out, but something or another was pinning her down pretty good this time.

Not having joined the parade back to the house, I took my place across the drive from where the crew was busy stacking the last of the chairs on the truck. Mister Joe had the kid and the old man lift and shake the carpet before rolling it up. Green indoor-outdoor

carpeting on fresh-cut grass. If that didn't beat all. But the best part was yet to come, because, after everything got cleared, in came the young dude riding the elephant.

What was I still doing there? Why did I rush back like that? Was it worth that ticket south of Jackson, just to come and see this two-bit show? It wasn't my funeral they were putting on. There was no role left here for me to play, much less the proper attire to play it with. I should've stayed in Birmingham and let the others pretend for me. They'd been pretty good with the pretend welcome, for sure —that is, until they let into me like a swarm of yellow-jackets:

What took you so long to come back, Chris? You didn't write, you didn't call.

"But I sent y'all a card every Christmas."

And what about Mama? Don't you care about your own folks anymore? And couldn't you have worn something decent?

"I was on the road a lot with the band, and I only learned about the funeral this morning."

What kind of a job is that? Don't they give you some time off to call or visit with your family?

It seemed even Mama could manage nothing better than a pat on the shoulder, saying, "Good to see you again, Chris." Just the kind of howdy-do that would put a dude out there under a pine tree, picking aimless tunes, and parked light-years away from the familial scene at the house.

The young dude started off guiding the elephant toward the hole, its polished struts and curled appendages gleaming in the afternoon sun. And how about that lemon-flavored aura emitted from its bulky torso, or the layer of trail dust clinging to its hide after miles of wandering? Check out those thick rubbery feet worn from too many earth-poundings … Yeah, yeah, so it was just an old backhoe after all. Still, I needed something to keep me amused, didn't I? I couldn't have come all that way for nothing, at least not to get stung senseless by my own family, then have them go quiet all of a sudden, with everyone interested in every facet of everyone

else's lives except mine. Didn't they want to hear about my travels? Some of the bands I'd worked with? Sonny Talcum's group? The Dillards? Starcatcher? I even helped load a bus for Waylon Jennings once. Didn't Uncle Mack used to like his stuff?

Let me back up. The only one who showed any interest whatsoever was, once again, good ol' Lynn, as always. She even asked about my plans and offered to bring me a plate of food, going so far as to say how perhaps she could talk Vent Junior into letting me sleep on the couch so I wouldn't have to hurry back. But then she got tied up with the concessions—I mean, refreshments—and I didn't see her for awhile.

And that's all what led me to take a seat across the drive from Daddy's open grave, uncertain whether I should just go or stay. Some fun, huh? There stood that elephant on the fresh-mown grass, swinging its long yellow trunk to scoop up the first snout-full of dirt. Grunting and groaning so, it struggled with that filthy load, snorting black smoke from its tusks with such indignation. Yeah, I knew how it felt.

Having missed the last half of the game, I had to catch it on the instant replay: how they found him on the kitchen floor, not the one at the house on Sherwood, mind you, but at Twin Cedars. An apparent heart attack, that's what the paramedics had said. Unconscious within seconds was the estimate, so no suffering, to which everyone said, "Thank goodness!" No last lingering thoughts before death, so no final words for his youngest to pick up and take back, even if someone had been there to collect them for him, which nobody was. Just some unidentified woman who'd phoned it in. But I knew better, certain of that unmentionable other never being brought up. Everything kept nice and clean and tidied up, like always.

The backhoe aimed its lift at the pile of clay and silt, its engine rumbling and sputtering as the young dude brought the bucket to a wobbly halt over the hole. He was gripping those levers like they could break off any minute, the body of the beast shook so hard.

“Easy now!” barked Mister Joe, a burly man in lime-green coveralls and faded red ball cap. He even flicked the ashes of his cigar like the snap of a whip. “Easy!”

Oh, and on top of the instant replay, I had the pleasure of hearing the post-game report, courtesy of Vent Junior. He filled in everyone on how Daddy had wanted to be buried with the gravestone facing the entrance, that way anyone coming to call would find him already predisposed for the rest of eternity, leaving the inquirer with nothing more than to walk away. I mean, just look at the inscription he’d insisted they put on his gravestone:

J Ventress North
1935-1998
Gone fishin’

Just like him, too.

That thing could’ve been more like a cat—the backhoe, I mean —ready to shovel dirt back into the hole it’d just dug, clawing the ground to cover the mess it’d made. Now, you can go ahead and question the cat part, but there it was, stamped right on the elephant’s big yellow and black butt in big white letters: CAT. And, believe it or not, that elephant-cat had showed up with more *a propo* than my getting there in a wrinkled “Take Me Home, Country Roads” t-shirt and thread-bare jeans just in time for the graveside service.

Its bucket hung there, ready to apply the earthen make-up layer upon layer to the face of the past, to disguise the “terrible tragedy”, and to make things the way the family felt they should be, censored and forgotten. Wasn’t it obvious? I had made it back just in time to see the door to my redemption about to be shut and locked forever …

… That is, until the elephant started acting kind of funny. The exertion must’ve gotten to it, I reckoned. How it coughed and staggered, sputtering, jerking, billowing smoke. Soon came less

smoke, and then, with just a few puffs more, the elephant-cat was fast asleep. Nighty night, sourpuss!

"Try it again!" hollered Mister Joe.

The young nervous rider tried rousing the beast, but it was no use. The crew chief peeled off a piece of the yellow hide and took a look at the tangled innards. He slipped off the cap and scratched his bald spot, frowning at the dirt-and-oil coated array. Then he started fiddling with the anatomy, pinching a hose here, tugging a wire there. The young dude got off and just stood limp-armed, while the old dude and the kid trotted off into the shade of some oaks. Young stud even tried reaching into the belly of the beast, but got his hand swatted away.

By this point, things had shifted into dulls-ville, making me think I could, you know, lend a hand … maybe? I did possess a little mechanical wherewithal from years of keeping my old Datsun running. I leaned ol' Judy against the tree and walked across the drive. "Need any help there?"

"What?" grunted Mister Joe. "You, help?" Then he kind of chuckled. "Naw, boy. Gone on, now. We'll call up at the house when we're done here."

You're welcome, old man! So much for offering my kind services.

Mister Joe then kicked one of the beast's rubbery feet, slapped his cap back on and stood hands on hips, staring at the unfilled hole and puffing away on that stub of a cigar. Like any of that kind of bluster would do any good. The bucket still hovered there, bits of dirt dribbling from its sides.

I figured I'd done enough, picked up ol' Judy and headed for my car parked by the shed. I would've just pulled out then and there and never looked back, like six years earlier. Just aimed that pile of bolts northward and skeedaddled, except for my head getting turned around like it usually did whenever I tried to run. Just like that hair in the tub, something was snagging my eyes, from the grass over by the woods. It was bright blue, and at first I thought it

might be a rabbit, looking kind of puffy and furry as it did. But a blue rabbit? I sauntered over and picked the blue-something up. A woman's bedroom slipper? Of all things, just lying out there in the grass. I slapped it against my leg, and with slipper and ol' Judy in toll—don't ask me why I kept the slipper—I tried heading for the car again.

But then Lynn appeared on the front porch, holding one of Mama's saucers and hollering, "You're not leaving yet, are you, Chris?"

Well, I felt obliged to say goodbye to her, at least. "I've got kind of a long drive ahead of me."

"Well, here. I saved some cake for you."

After shoving Judy through the open driver's window, I headed for the porch. The others were making such a racket on the deck out back. Figuring from the talk and laughter, none of them would've even missed me, had I pulled out.

The shadows from the trees were already creeping toward Daddy's open grave, and the rousties, still kicking, tugging, pinching and prodding the slumbering beast, appeared no closer to finishing the job. By my watch it was after 3:00, and there stood Lynn waving that saucer with a big chunk of chocolate cake on it.

"It's homemade," she said. "Never know when you'll get some again."

"I guess I could try a piece," I replied upon reaching the steps. "Didn't get much for breakfast, except a candy bar from a quick stop."

"A candy bar? Why, Chris, what am I going to do with you?"

That cake sure did look good, I can tell you that. I couldn't remember when I'd last had good homemade chocolate cake, it'd been so long.

"We've got plenty more inside," she said. "Help yourself."

"This'll do. Thanks."

We then sat together on the steps in the shade of the two cedars out front—those were the namesakes of the place, by the way. The

house and front area still looked the same as I remembered them. Nothing had really changed. Still, I felt as though something was off. There sat the old shed, and the oak still stood with that rusty basketball hoop dangling from it. Daddy's bass boat was astride its trailer in the carport, with Lynn's minivan now next to it. The branches of the two cedars had really bushed out, which was natural, of course. The floorboards of the front porch remained just as slick and glossy as ever, but the three rocking chairs which had sat there in years past were gone. Maybe that was it, I figured. Looking around and wondering where those chairs might've gone to, I noticed that Lynn's legs were shaking.

Unlike the other North women who kept their hair short and curly, Lynn's was long and wavy, and she wore wire-rimmed frames instead of the standard plastic. Vent Junior had met her while stationed in Mississippi. Following his stint in the Army, he showed up at home one evening with Lynn, just a little plump in the belly, in tow. J Ventress North III, "Little Vent" to everybody east of Airline Highway, came within a few months. She kept that girlish figure years later, if you could believe it.

Her dress was dark green, not black, and over it she had tied an apron. The hem was now flapping from the quivering of her legs.

I figured I could calm her down with a compliment of some sort. "I still can't believe my brother's luck in finding you."

She slapped her knees together and giggled like a child, squeezing her eyes shut. "Oh, enough said about that." Lynn patted my knee and stared off into the distance. On top of those legs starting to shake again, a worried look took hold of her face.

"No, I mean it," I kept going, figuring I could keep her occupied. "You've always been so cheery and nice to everybody, especially me."

Her face snapped back to a smile. "Tsk! Well, you needed some cheering, stuck all alone up there away from your family. Now don't go rushing off so quick like before. Finish your cake. There's no hurry." She then went to fiddling with her hair, letting her face

get contorted now.

I shrugged and continued savoring the chocolate icing and filling. The dark cake-part wasn't too bad either, fluffy but not too thick as to choke you. It only took a few chews to bring me back to noticing Lynn again. She was staring off into the distance again, kind of like she was expecting someone to show up.

That hunk of cake was just too much for one sitting, but taking it with me would've been out of the question. The saucer was a piece from Grandma North's china, and Mama would've had a fit if it went missing.

"I really should be getting back," I said, setting down the saucer and starting up from the steps.

"Oh, Chris!" Lynn's hand was resting on my shoulder. "It'd mean so much to me if you stayed." But then, with elbow to knee and chin to fist, she took up that staring posture once more. "I mean, there's all that food you'd be missing, and …" And once again, silence.

"And?"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Lynn, what's wrong? Is Vent Junior giving you a hard time? Let me talk to him."

"Oh, no, Chris. Don't do that. It's not about Vent, anyway. Well, it is, but …" More silence.

"But?"

"Oh, forget I even brought it up. What's that you've got there?" She was talking about the slipper which I'd laid on the step under me.

"Just something I picked up off the grass," I replied. "Don't know whose it is, or why I even kept it."

Lynn squinted at the thing. "Could it be hers? But how …? I mean, oh, silly me! Bet it's one of your mama's. Give it here and I'll take it to her."

"I'm not so sure. Mama hardly ever spent more than a day up here, as far as I can remember."

“Well, uh, maybe some dog dragged it up. No telling. Give it here and I’ll go throw it in the garbage.”

So, I handed her the slipper. No skin off my knuckles. She just slipped it into a pocket of her apron, crossed her hands over it and resumed that distracted look of hers.

In my mind, I was already driving Highway 37 North, making the turn onto 10 at Greensburg and heading out to I-55. I’d be at Jackson an hour or two later, before taking I-20 East. By sundown, the Datsun would be headed down the exit at Birmingham. Still, what would be waiting for me there except a cold, dark, and empty trailer which didn’t hold much of a steady life for a single dude anyway? And no need to worry about any of those uninvited disasters showing up, like burglars or tornadoes or my ex-girlfriend walking in and picking up the place. So what was the hurry?

But then it hit me. Like I said, Twin Cedars felt the same but somehow different. I just couldn’t let that strange feeling go.

“I feel like a stranger here, Lynn. I don’t really know these people anymore. It’s not that I’ve been gone for so long, but that I’ve changed, while the others haven’t. They’re all still wrapped up in the money. But somehow you’ve always managed to stay clean. I’d really like to know your secret.”

“Secret?” She snapped out of her trance, looking stunned. “Why, what makes you think I’ve got a secret?”

“I don’t know. I was just wondering.”

“There’s no secret, Chris. Nothing to be concerned about, okay? Just … keep eating there and don’t mind me. Nothing to worry about.” There she went again, anxiously staring across the front clearing.

“Nothing?” I said.

“I wonder if Mister Joe needs help out there. You think he might charge extra for repairs?”

I was trying to follow her line of sight but could only tell that she wasn’t staring at Mister Joe and the other rousties. Something else? Anyway, I took the change of subject in stride. “Oh, don’t

worry about them. I'm sure Vent Junior's got it covered."

"What?"

"I said, I'm sure any repair work is covered. Are you alright, Lynn?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Nothing to worry about."

"You said that already."

"Oh, here comes Mister Joe now."

The crew chief was heading toward us from across the clearing, weaving in and out between the parked vehicles. When I turned back to Lynn, she was off on another cloud. But this time I was able to snag the thing she'd been eyeing. I was thinking, what's with the old shed? She was so focused on it, scrunching her apron as if half-expecting the red-and-white building to just up and start after her.

When Mister Joe got into the shade of the cedars, he tipped his cap to Lynn with a "Pardon me, ma'am," then propped a foot on the bottom step and leaned in toward me, his cigar breath blasting me in the face.

"Son, go tell Mister North that I need to see him for a minute."

"My name's North," I said, fanning away the cigar stench. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, pardon me, son." He then backed off a bit, thankfully. "I didn't know you were kin. You see, I was told to talk to Mister Vent North."

"Hey, Joe!" My brother came out the screen door and stomped onto the porch. To give you an updated view, the earring had come off years before, he'd let his hair grow a bit, and a half-trimmed mustache sat over his lip. He'd taken to wearing a pair of those red suspenders sported by the corporate power-monger types, and with a bit more scalp showing to boot. "What's the hold up out there, man?"

"Sorry, sir, but our backhoe," Ol' Smokey Joe tried explaining, "well, you see … it just plain conked out."

"Why didn't you check that thing before bringing it out here?" Big Brother argued.

“Well, Mister North,” the ringmaster kept going, “it was working real fine yesterday. So I figured it wouldn’t give us any trouble, what with the small job and all.”

“*Small? You figured?* Why, I paid good money for a good job, not for figuring. Now, what I need to know is, what are y’all going to do about Daddy’s grave? You can’t just leave it open like that, Joe. Now, come on!”

“Well, you see, uh, I was hoping to borrow a couple of shovels, if you don’t mind.”

“Shovels?” Vent Junior let out, scowling. “Chris, you remember Daddy keeping any shovels around the place?”

“I don’t know,” I replied with a shrug. “Maybe the shed?” Bad idea apparently, because, just then, Lynn’s hand grabbed my wrist and started squeezing. And she had to go and take hold of it, just as I was lifting an overloaded fork of cake and icing up to my mouth. Score one meal for the ants.

“Vent, honey,” she said. “Maybe we could ask the lady … I mean, the folks next door. No sense in digging around in that old shed.”

“No, baby. We don’t know those folks. We’re just strangers to them.”

“That’s right, ma’am,” added Joe. “Was a time when you could count on your neighbors. Now, no telling what sort of riff-raff’s living next to you. Could be druggies—or worse, some crazy old lady with a mean dog.”

Lynn shook her head. “I don’t think there’s a dog … well, at least I’ve never seen one.”

Vent Junior waved him away and said, “Just go look in the shed over there, Joe.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, glancing behind him. “But it looks from here to have a lock on it.”

“Locked?” Like my big brother couldn’t imagine Daddy keeping his stuff locked up. Wasn’t it Mister Inquisitive who once tried picking the lock on the liquor cabinet, so he and Wayne Hadley

could get a little something for, as they put it, “softening up” the girls at the senior prom?

“But Vent,” said Lynn. “Your Daddy never kept anything in there besides the riding mower.”

“Lynn, baby, don’t argue. Just go ask Mama where the key to the shed is.”

“She might not remember. And the house next door isn’t far. Perhaps Chris could even …”

“Well, go and ask her anyway. And hurry it up. These men can’t stand around all day, not with what I’m paying.”

Lynn sighed, then took another look at the shed, as well as glancing toward the old Blomberg place, before going and slamming the screen door on the way in.

It’s amazing how love works, isn’t it?

“So, Chris.” My brother came and sat down beside me. “I hope you won’t be too disappointed.”

“About what?” I asked, chuckling. “Not finding any shovels in the shed?”

“Heck, no! I’m talking about your inheritance there, buddy.”

“So, what about it? I suppose Daddy left me something.”

“That’s just it. There ain’t nothing for you. Sorry, pal.” He then patted me on the back.

“Wait a minute, Vent. You’re putting me on. Right?”

“Wish I were. Turns out Daddy decided to disinherit you.”

Mister Joe turned away, coughing and spitting.

I was sure my brother was joking. “No way! Daddy was always talking stuff like that. He never meant any of it, not even when Penny ran off with Rick.”

“Hey, I was as surprised as you,” Vent Junior went on. “But there it was in his will, black and white.”

“Hold on. You’ve seen the will?”

“As executor of the estate, why, sure.” He was thumbing one of the suspenders now.

“This is crazy!”

“Daddy had it all done legal.”

“But what … what did he have against me?”

Big Brother then laid it out. “Well, let’s see. According to Louisiana law—and my lawyer, of course—if a child doesn’t call or write for two years when he has the means to, the parent can disinherit him. Don’t ask me why, but Daddy thought that was good enough. I mean … grounds enough. Well, you know what I mean.”

My eyes almost bugged out. “I wrote y’all. I sent Christmas cards every year.”

“Oh, sure. To me and Lynn, but not Daddy.”

“They were meant for the whole family.”

“He must’ve seen it different. You know how he was. Anyway, there’s no reason for you to hang around for the will reading. But if you need some extra cash, I’m sure a little loan could be worked out.”

“Hold on,” I said. “Does this have anything to do with the cold shoulder I’ve been getting all day?”

“Oh, no, Chris! Everyone else feels just as sorry as we do … me and Lynn. It’s just that … well, for starters, the way you’re dressed. I mean, come on, Chris! Couldn’t you have picked up a shirt and tie somewhere? And that bucket of bolts you drove up in. Isn’t that the same car you bought in high school? You just didn’t give enough thought to how it’d look, did you?”

There it was. I’d come all that way just to learn how my old man had done dropped the hammer on me. I could’ve cared less about the money. Yes, sir. Just fine without it. No hang-ups there. No, sir. Well, OK, I could’ve used some extra cash to help me through the dry season, while the band took a break from touring. But to be cut off completely?

“Hold the phone!” I said. “This is not about that time I ran the Suburban into a tree and Daddy whipped you instead of me? You’re not still sore about that, are you?”

“What?” Vent Junior said. “What are you talking about? I …” My brother started chuckling and looking at Mister Joe, like I’d told

a joke. Next he was up and marching across the porch. “What’s holding up that woman anyway?”

That’s when the screen door creaked open and Lynn came out holding an open phone book. “Honey, your mama says a Black man comes and cuts the grass once a month. And he’s the only one with a key. Here’s his number, but I tried it already and nobody answered.”

“What’s his name then? Rufus Jones? 985…” Vent Junior’s cell phone beeped away as he punched in the number. “I’ll give him a call and have him out here in no time, even if I have to go get him myself.”

“But he might be gone for the day,” said Lynn. “Don’t you think so, Chris?”

While my brother walked toward the end of the porch with the phone stuck to his ear, Lynn stooped and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Chris?” she said. “Is everything alright?”

But now I was doing the “Lynn” thing, staring off into space, trying again to figure a faster route back, and whether I still had enough for gas.

“I’m so sorry, Chris,” Lynn continued. “I would’ve tried talking to your daddy, if I’d known.”

“That’s alright,” I lied. “I never expected much anyway.” That road was looking more and more inviting by the second.

Mister Joe came back up. “I sure hope y’all can get that fella out here quick. We’ve got to get that backhoe to the shop before it closes. There’s another burial tomorrow.”

“I’m sure things will work out,” said Lynn. “Maybe we could still go over and ask next door.”

“Oh, no, ma’am,” he replied. “Don’t trouble yourself.”

“Would your men like something to drink? We have some iced tea.”

“Thank you, ma’am. No, we’ll do just fine.”

Vent Junior snapped shut the cell phone and stomped back.

“Great! Out of service. Well, that hole’s not going to fill itself. Joe, please tell me you’ve got a crowbar or something in the back of that truck.”

“I believe I do. Two, in fact.”

“Go get them then and meet us over by the shed.”

“Honey,” Lynn said. “You sure about this? They might tear it up.”

“Baby, that’s better than leaving Daddy’s grave open like that. Come on, Chris. You may not have a share in the estate, but here’s a chance to earn those extra bucks.”

I knew I should’ve said something like, “Forget it, I’m outta here,” or “Have fun, cream pie.” I don’t know why I stuck around. It must have been the way Lynn was looking at me, sort of in that “Help me out here, Chris,” way of hers, like back when Vent Junior had wanted to name their boy “Stormin’ Norm” North. So, I gave in and followed General Cream Pie over to the shed like a good little soldier. Always the sucker for a woman in need, let me tell you.

I looked for Lynn to be close behind, but she’d already went back into the house.

•

WHEN WE GOT over to the shed, Vent Junior jiggled the lock, just for spite. Then Mister Joe came walking over with a four-foot crowbar, followed by the old dude carrying another like it.

“We use these to shimmy headstones sometimes,” Mister Joe said.

“Don’t worry about the damage,” said Vent Junior. “It’s nothing that can’t be fixed.”

“You’re the boss.” Mister Joe managed to squeeze his bar behind the latch-plate, first tugging at it then bracing his foot and pulling harder. After a few tries, he slipped it out with a clang and shook his head. “That thing’s screwed on there pretty tight.”

“Give me that,” said my brother, taking the bar from Mister Joe

and having a go himself. He jerked and cursed and sweated. His tie flipped and flapped, and large dark stains formed under the pits of his white shirt. “Give me a hand here, Chris!” So I reached in and took hold of the bar with him, but Vent Junior was jerking so much that he nearly knocked me down.

“Hold on, Mister Vent,” said the old dude. “Thems ain’t screws. Theys look more like bolts and goes straight through a two-by-four on the other side. Yes, sir.”

“Dang, Eddie!” said Mister Joe, eyeing it. “You’re right. It’ll take more than a bar to bust that thing loose.”

Vent Junior slid the bar out and handed it to the crew chief. “Here. Try it on the hinges then.”

Mister Joe wedged the bar under the top hinge. And they were big wide hinges, too. But soon some of the screws started to give. “Help me out here, Eddie!” The old dude slipped his bar in beside the other, and the two men struggled together. The wood splintered and cracked as the screws lost their grip. “That one’s done.” They then turned over their bars and tackled the bottom hinge.

A glint of light caught my eye, and I turned to find Lynn coming over with a tray full of dinner glasses filled with tea and ice.

“I poured some tea for the men, honey,” she said. “Maybe they could take a break and try later.”

“Baby,” replied Big Brother, “can’t you see they’re still hard at work here. Let me have one of those anyway.” In between slurps, and despite not having done any real work, Vent Junior was gasping and wiping sweat from his brow like a marathoner.

The two men had gotten the next hinge loose, but one of its screws still clung to the frame. By this time, the boy and the young dude had walked over and each taken a glass from the tray, thanking Lynn. It was already nearly four o’clock. What more was there for me to do? Here was the whole crew, plenty of help.

And there was Lynn, pouting so. It must’ve been all she could stand, throwing down the empty tray and crossing her arms like she did.

“Baby,” said Vent Junior. “Why don’t you go inside, if this bothers you that much.”

I walked over and touched her shoulder. “Come on, Lynn. What’s really bothering you?”

“Oh …,” she moaned. “It’s just that … never mind. Nothing I can do about it now anyway.”

Mister Joe and the old dude had the second hinge off, with Eddie catching the door before it fell. That left a large dark gaping hole through which Mister Joe then disappeared.

“Look around in there, will you?” said my brother. “Can you see anything?”

The crew chief poked his head back out. “No, sir. No shovels in here.”

“Great! That’s just great.”

Just then, there came the sound of gravel crunching on the road out front. A Southland Express delivery van was pulling in and heading toward the shed. On top of that, Mama was now hollering from the front porch. Rick, Penny, and Uncle Mack had come filing out of the house, as well.

“Vent Junior!” Mama called. “For heaven’s sake, aren’t they ever going to get that man buried?”

Now it was Big Brother’s turn to get flustered. “Lynn, baby,” he said. “Please go talk to Mama for me, will you, hon?”

Mister Joe wiped his hands and told him, “Sorry, Mister North, but we can’t hang around any longer. Come on, Eddie. Let’s load up.”

Vent Junior went trailing after them. “Now, hold on, Joe!”

I was starting to feel as livid about Mister Executor as I’d been sorry for Lynn. Things had come to a screeching halt, with no one giving a hoot about Daddy’s open grave over there. It was like the whole world had forgotten the man had even existed.

A chubby dude in shorts stepped out of the van, carrying a large envelope. “Got a delivery here for Mister J Ventress North.”

“Just hold on a sec,” Big Brother said to him. “Hey, Joe!”

I could see Daddy now, if he had been still living, throwing a fit of his own, stomping off to get his boat in the water, cranking the motor and getting the hell up-river. I wouldn't have blamed him this time. I'd done the same, if it weren't for …

Speaking of someone who had just thrown a fit …

When I turned around, Lynn was nowhere to be seen. With everyone's attention elsewhere, I decided to step over the door on the ground and have a look in the shed myself. There sat the shiny orange lawn tractor with a five-gallon can of gas next to it, and there on the wall hung a couple of rakes but, like Mister Joe had said, no shovels. I was almost tempted to go and try raking the dirt in myself, except for what next caught my eye.

Something behind the tractor shimmered in the half-light from the doorway. It was Lynn's dark green dress. She was facing some sort of mirror on the back wall.

"Oh, hey Lynn," I said. "Was wondering where you'd gotten off to."

Lynn turned around and gasped, glancing between me and the mirror.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," I kept on. "Wonder what that old medicine cabinet's doing out here. Probably nothing left in it."

Lynn sighed and said, "I'm sorry, Chris, but I have to tell you something real important. I didn't want to say anything around my husband, but …"

Mama was hollering again, "Vent Junior!"

Vent Junior was hollering, too. "Hey, Lynn! You ought to come and see this. It's incredible."

Lynn peered out the door, then pulled something from her apron pocket while motioning me to come nearer. She opened her hand, revealing a small flat piece of metal.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's the key to the shed," she whispered. "Oh, Chris! You're never going to believe this."

“Hey, Lynn!” Vent Junior kept hollering.

“Vent Junior!” Mama’s voice cracked.

“Oh, Chris!” Lynn was trembling now. “It’s about your daddy and the woman next door.”

“What about the woman next door?”

“Well, she’s … I just need your help. I can’t keep this to myself any longer.”

Yep, a real sucker for a woman in need. That’s me, Chris “Cream Pie” North.

4

Sweedee

1:05 PM WED

Ruby, seems your old mom has finally calmed down. Sleeping better, too.

So, the last time I talked to you was … what? A day or two ago? Maybe three? Aah! Who knows? Anyway, they finally came and got him. Vent, that is. Quicker than you'd think, too. Was up here watching and waiting for them to show up. First, there was the ambulance—didn't know that's who "911" was. Then, a sheriff's car pulled up, and another one later on. They even sent out a fire truck and a police car, as well. And last came the coroner's wagon. Yeah, Ruby, just three little numbers and you can call out the whole freaking army. Man, the kind of attention people get after they're dead. Good thing Vent had gone on to heaven, 'cause if he'd opened his eyes and seen all those people standing over him he'd have gotten madder than a wet cat.

When this old gal goes, they can just toss the body in the river. That'd be easier than letting those yahoos over there mess with it. A cat could do a better job covering up that hole. Looks like the old guy's got his hand stuck in the thing now. Ten to one, it's just out of gas.

That young guy walking up the drive must be one of the kids. Kind of a scruffy-looking fellow with that beard and long hair. He seemed like a gravedigger at first, but then he went to hugging some of the folks after it was over. Guess he has the same attitude as me, tired of dressing up for the benefit of others.

Could've kicked myself for not using the CB, though. Just that freaked out. You see, Vent knew Sweedee couldn't just sit around this dump with nothing to do and nowhere to go. So, he set up the CB for me. After saying, "Hey, good buddy!" to some trucker, it was down to the road for a free ride. They're really a nice bunch of guys. Yeah, they were taking a big chance, hauling this old broad around the whole U S of A. Something about it being illegal, wouldn't ya know. That's why there's always a good word for those truckers whenever I'm talking to the Big Guy.

Can't complain now. It's been such a gorgeous day for a funeral, hasn't it? Sun's livening up the new green leaves. Only a few white puffs floating around up there, and that soft breeze feels like silk on my skin. Wish Vent could've been here to enjoy it. Did you ever hear, Ruby, how I met the guy? Of course, not. Only had this recorder-thing since, well, since that day. Vent gave it to me, saying something like, "You oughta make a record of your thoughts and experiences for posterity." Well, here's an up-the-posterior thought: should've gone with the longs instead of the menthols, these coffin-nails don't hold up two seconds. Excuse me, honey, gotta light up another.

1:07 PM WED

Back. You miss me? Well, miss you, too, baby. So, here's how old Sweedee met the great J Ventress North. Ten to one, his family has no clue about me, much less how close we were. 'Cause if they did, they'd have thrown his body in the river by now, along with mine. But here's one thing over them: this old gal knew the real Vent North way better than they ever did.

So, where was it? Oh, yeah! The World's Fair, the one they had down in New Orleans. Found a soft spot in the wire fence that morning and managed to squeeze through. Certainly wasn't ready, willing or able to shell out the bucks they wanted for a ticket, so it was the scenic route or nothing. Some pretty cool stuff in that place. The most interesting was in the Vatican exhibit. And you know my passion for medieval art. They had some genuine pieces alright—very up close and personal, too. Course, not sure anyone wanted to get too up-close with old Sweedee, at least not without some deodorizer. But, what the hay-fever. So, there she was, browsing around, when up popped this nice-looking older gent staring at one of the icons, a 13th-century Russian Madonna and child, if memory serves. Here she was, standing next to this guy—well, not too next to him, didn't want to scare him off, you see—and we were both looking at this thing, and out of my mouth came, "You can see the Byzantine influence in the mosaic quality."

He sort of gave me a side-long glance and said, "Yeah, especially in the naturalness of the draperies."

There was getting to be this, you know, connectiveness between us, so out came something a little bolder like, "It echoes the brilliance of Gothic stained-glass with the gold-plated haloes."

He seemed to light up at that, saying how the extreme solemnity of the Orthodox tradition could be seen embodied in the work, making it such a revered object, too holy for common hands to touch. Ruby, at that point something inside this old bag of bones started to sing. It was like the first warm day of Spring, with less of the chilling winds and more of the vibrant sunlight that really makes you want to get out, stretch your limbs and take a deep breath. And he didn't seem to mind the smell, either.

Really felt like this could've been it. Yeah, yeah, that sounds extreme, but being out in the cold for so long does things to your mind, making you think anything's possible. Of course, there wasn't much to look at. And the whole time, it kept running through my skull, "Sweedee, what would a guy like that want with an ugly

chick like you?" Meaning that after you've walked past a few storefront windows and compared yourself with the slim mannequins and the air-brushed beauty queens stuck on billboards, there's just no use pretending anymore. And living on the street doesn't exactly help your complexion, either.

So, we just continued bumming around the exhibit, discussing other pieces. Things were starting to warm up, when he ups and says he's got to get back to his wife and kids. Wife and kids! That was a blow. Could've kicked myself, or at least gone and banged my head against a dumpster. But then, he gave me his card and said to call him collect if ever there was something needed. He even said he could get me a job somewhere if it suited. Me? Working a job? Well, had a job once, but another story for another time, honey. So, old Sweedee just backed down, lied and said she'd think about it.

About six months later, there was this ad for an art exhibit, something I thought maybe Vent would be interested in. Around that time, my line was to do a little consulting work with the street artists, you know, give them a few pointers for a cup of coffee and a sandwich. So, picked up and gave Vent a ring. He seemed real enthused, which got me feeling real good, too. We met, toured the exhibit, and then he bought me lunch. The sweetest thing! We had a good time, sitting on a bench on the Riverwalk and chatting all afternoon. That's when he brought up the offer again, wanting to help me off the street. It was tempting, but his motives were unclear. Maybe he'd been pimping or preaching somewhere. Those were the only types who'd taken any interest in this old gal, and she knew where to tell them both to get off. But you've got to hand it to the preachers—they'd mostly been pretty straight forward with Sweedee. Meaning, none of that, "Yeah, baby, all you gotta do is show a little cheek." Yeah, she showed those pimps some cheek, alright.

Now, where did it all go again? Oh, yeah! Vent was truly interested in helping, but not so sure on this end. So, out came another lie about needing time to think it over. Yeah, like there

wasn't much else on my schedule, other than where to sleep, or what to eat, or more importantly, where to pee and poop. You'd be surprised at how rude some people can be when you ask to use their facilities. But even tougher was having to stand in line for one, especially in the mornings.

Sorry, honey. Gotta light up again. Watching the activity over there and talking about old times has gotten me snacking on smoke like it was candy.

1:20 PM WED

OK, back again. Had to take a potty break, too. So, to slice things thinner, a year or two went by, and it didn't get any easier. You know, New Orleans was no Atlanta. Peachtown was familiar territory, and a lot cleaner, too. Still, dumpster diving had lost its appeal. Yeah, the quality of stuff people were throwing out was really going downhill. But one day, I snagged a bag with some oily fries behind a Burger Master. Sweedee was munching away, when one of her street pals—Sally, I think her name was—pops up and says how a rich-looking fellow was asking around. Well, it couldn't have been some pimp, 'cause old Sweedee was way past prime by then. There'd been a preacher prowling the streets in a limo, but he wasn't out to save any souls, believe you me.

"So, Sally," I said to her. "Where'd you see him?"

"Parked up front," she said.

"Up front? In this neighborhood? Well, let me finish lunch first."

"Uh, oh!" Sally moaned.

"Uh, oh, what?"

She started backing away and said, "It's those two again."

There were these two dope-dealers, T-Bone and Rhino, coming down the alley.

"Well, if it isn't the two boneheads." That was my observation.

But Sally was acting scared, as usual. "Come on, Sweedee," she said, motioning to me. "Let's get out of here. They're just looking

for trouble."

She was already turned and getting ready to run. My street pals were for the most part a close-knit bunch, but some were just plain chicken about standing up for themselves, especially when it came to thugs and dope-dealers.

"Go on, Sally," I told her. "Catch up with you later."

She scurried off, but I still had some fries left in the bag. Back then it was hard coming across a decent bag of fries.

"Hey, Sweedee!" said T-Bone. "What'ja doin', Sweedee?"

"What's it look like, P-Brain? I'm eating."

Then Rhino walked up and said, "Gimme some of them fries there, honey."

"Get your own there, Wino."

"I think I will," he said and snatched the bag from me. Well, that started getting me real ticked, but my cool wasn't going anywhere. You see, a lesson was learned a long time before on how to deal with such trash. So, here's a little something for you, Ruby, another posterior thought: trash belongs in the trash, and it doesn't take much to pick it up and put it there.

There came old T-Bone, sitting down next to me, trying to get friendly like always.

"Hey dere, Sweedee! How 'bout goin' on a date with me sometime. Huh, sugar?"

I said, "What'ja have in mind?" That was with a fake smile, of course.

He scooted closer. "You and me could do a little dirty dancin', ya know." Then, he had his hand on my knee.

But these teeth of mine just kept on shining and gritting. "So, you want a feel of ol' Sweedee, do ya?"

"Yeah! Gimme some of dat Sweedee-pie."

"Ya *really* wanna feel, sugar?"

"Oh, you know I do, baby."

"Sure, honey. Let me help you feel it." Then out came my tire iron, right up against his head. That one I always kept under my

coat, ‘cause no telling when trash would need taking out.

Well, after old T-Bone got flattened, Rhino started to jump in. But the tire iron met him across the knees, and with that lanky torso bent over, there came another greeting back of the head.

Then, this old gal just stood up, lit up an after-lunch smoke, and blew a nice wad over T-Bone’s ugly face. “Feel good, T-Bone sugar?”

Finally, a swift kick to those scrawny ribs. Yeah, hated having to take out the trash, but sometimes it had to get done.

Kept that tire iron handy, too, ‘cause no telling what’d be waiting around front. But there he was again, good old Vent. So, away with the iron. He had this really nice truck and was looking pretty good himself. He seemed both happy to see me and kind of anxious, too, like there might be some trouble.

I said to him, “Pretty nice duds there, Vent.”

“Looking pretty good yourself, Sweedee,” he responded. He was lying, of course, but no fuss from me.

“Heard you were looking for old Sweedee. So, what’s up?”

“Thought I’d tempt you with another offer. Was a little concerned. I mean, you deserve better than living out here.”

“That’s really sweet of you, Vent. This your truck?”

“Yeah. Want to go for a spin?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

“You mean, just like that?”

“Just like that. This old gal’s done with this town anyway.”

To spread the butter a little thinner, Vent then hauled me up here to the boonies. But there was no room for me over at his place, not with his wife and kids showing up unannounced on occasion. So, he gave me the place next door. Not too bad. Of course, the best parts are this balcony and the back porch which gives a nice view of the sun rising over the river. Gotta get back outside every so often, just to feel at home.

Hang on, Ruby. Looks like the gang’s scoping out the shed. What do they expect to find in there? Nothing but the riding mower that

Rufus uses. If that isn't a bunch of yahoos …

Sorry, honey. Gotta take another potty break.

2:09 PM WED

Well, looks like the excitement's over. The whole gang's gone back inside. And those yahoos haven't even finished the job. What they oughta done was get those jack-asses back out there on their knees and make them fill in Vent's grave with their bare hands.

So, back to Vent. Old Sweedee just hung out with him from time to time, giving him a few pointers on his painting style. But then things started happening. Didn't mean for them to, but they did. The old flesh can really screw you up with its wants and needs. Had mine, and I guess Vent had his, too. But no whoring around. OK? So, there. Swore it'd stop, kept telling myself how wrong it was, him being still married and all. But the Lord said his dad would forgive and forget, if it came from the heart. So, it did. Boy, did it! My knees are still sore.

Things went that way for awhile. Vent would buy me things, artistic comments would then be forthcoming. His composition was a bit off, so the suggestion was made that he try drawing first with a grid. That helped. He never seemed to mind the input, especially if it was followed up with a nightly get-together. He did mind the sermons, though. Teaching him about the Big Guy was tough. He'd get mad and storm out. So Sweedee backed off some, took it easy on him. You know, it's hard working with someone who doesn't know their Bible. A story hint here and there, just to see if he'd take the bait, get himself into the book. He could read, couldn't he?

There was one night when it must've gotten to him. Hadn't pressed too hard, but there was a sore spot in the way, nonetheless. Just sitting up in bed smoking and noticed this red spot on his arm. Thought maybe he was bleeding or had a rash, but with a brush of the finger found it to be a tattoo. A spider tattoo! Ugly thing, too. Well, Vent must've not liked the poking, 'cause he pushed my hand

away and covered his arm.

"What's that thing for?" I said, meaning the tattoo.

"Nothing," he grumbled. "Go to sleep."

"You in some sort of gang or something?"

"Just go back to sleep."

"OK, OK, just curious, that's all."

Did some more sitting, puffing and thinking. But Vent kept sighing and grunting. After awhile, he flopped onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

"So, what're you thinking?" I said. "About how old Sweedee's being a big pain in the rear?"

"No. Just some things that've been on my mind lately. I told you about my boy running off, didn't I?"

"Heard something about it for the past, what, four years?"

"Lynn says he's up in Birmingham now. Maybe I should invite him to come for a visit. What do you think?"

I blew a wad of smoke and said, "Well, hello there, Vent. He's your kid. You should make him come home."

"No, no. He's set in his ways, just like his old man."

"Then give him some time."

"He's had all the time in the world. Don't you think he'd be missing us by now?"

"Don't know. Maybe he's like the kid in that story."

"Hold it! Not another one of those stupid bible lessons. OK? If you're going to preach, then just turn out the light."

"Fine! You don't want to hear about the Prodigy Kid? Fine! Hint taken."

So, off went the lamp and more sitting, puffing and biding some time. Soon, you could feel Vent shifting around on the mattress, like ants had crawled in bed with him.

"Great!" he said. "So, what's the deal with this kid? What's his name?"

"The Prodigy Kid. Haven't you heard of the Prodigy Kid? It's a bestseller from way back."

“That’s not the *Karate Kid*, is it? I’ve seen that movie already.”

“Prah-duh-jee! Not Karate. It’s in the book.”

“You know I don’t read much.”

“Yeah, figured. Well, he and his old man had a fight, just like you and your kid.”

“You’re making this up.”

“No, it’s a true story, right there in Luke. Luke was a doctor. You trust doctors, don’t you?”

“To charge an arm and a leg for a check-up, yeah.”

“Well, Luke told this story that the Lord had told him. You see, the Prodigy Kid was real snotty. He wanted his share of the old man’s loot, and said so to his face. So, his dad says, ‘Fine!’ and gives it to him. Can you believe that?”

“What did he do with it? Start his own business?”

“No, you jerk! He was this snotty-nosed spoiled brat. He just took the money and painted the town a bright fuchsia. First, he gambled, then he drank, then he gambled some more, then he started hanging out with the street walkers. Then the stock market crashed, a lot of people lost their jobs, and the price of cigarettes went up … again! So, he took to eating from dumpsters. And that’s when he got this idea.”

Vent had gotten real still and quiet then, no doubt he was hooked. Just took my time, had a few more puffs, scratched my head, rubbed my palms.

“What happened then?” he ups again. “What? He went on welfare or something?”

“No, you idiot!” I hollered. “They didn’t have welfare back then. It was every Joseph and Mary for themselves. As long as you didn’t mess with the Romans. Now, there was a mean bunch.”

“What’s the Romans got to do with the kid starving?”

“Hey, nothing! So let me finish. OK? Well, the kid figured he’d go begging to his old man, maybe even put in a resumé, just to get a little something to snack on. So, he starts heading back. But his dad saw him coming and said, ‘Sakes alive! There’s my boy!’ And he

runs and hugs him and kisses him and shakes his hand. Man, that kid didn't know what to think. Then the old man goes and throws him a party. But then there was his other kid, and old Bro comes and says, 'Hey, pop! What gives? I've been stuck here all this time without so much as a howdy-do, then the little punk shows back up and you're treating him like royalty.' But the old man just lays into him and says, 'Hey, boy! He's your kin. So, go say howdy yourself. We thought he was dead, run over or got knived. Now, he comes home safe as a lark. Get over it. Come join the family.' And that's how the Prodigy Kid got his name. He was prodigious or something. Smart kid, too. Mind you, he knew when to hold 'em, knew when to fold 'em, knew when to walk away, and knew when to run."

Something was up with Vent. I just knew he hated that song, but he was keeping real quiet then. I could hear him sniffling, too. So, on went the light and, lo and behold, honest to G, there were a couple of tears on his cheek.

"Vent? You alright?"

"Go to sleep."

"You want to hear anymore?"

"No. Just go to sleep."

Then he rolled over. Out went the cigarette, off went the lamp and this old gal settled in next to him. After awhile, though, he got up and went downstairs.

After sun-up, there he was on the deck, staring across the river. I just took a seat nearby with my coffee and smokes. The sky was kind of hazy and the air was a bit chilled, like someone had left the fridge open. We just sat there, neither one of us saying anything, till old Sweedee decided to go and break the mold.

"So, how's it going, Vent?"

"You know," he started, paused, then started again. "I've been doing some thinking about what you said."

"What was that?"

"Cut it out! You know."

"Try me."

“Well, I realized I’m not getting any younger and need to start setting some things to rights. Turn over a new fig leaf and all that.”

“Sounds fine to me. So, what’s the plan?”

“First, I’m going to give Evelyn what she’s always wanted: a divorce.”

That one really hit the fan pretty good. “Now, hold on, Vent. Just think about this. This old gal would rather split than break up your marriage, pal.”

“No, no. You see, she’s been asking for it for a long time—not directly, but in her own way. The woman’s miserable being Missus North, so I’m setting her free.”

“Guess that’s not too bad. Nice of you to think of others’ feelings.”

“And that’s not all. I’m going to turn the business over to Vent Junior.”

“You mean, you’re quitting all that dough?”

“I’ve got things set up pretty nicely for myself without it. Besides, it’ll help clear my conscience of the whole thing.”

“What thing? What, it’s going under or something? You’re cooking the books?”

“Where do you get these ideas from? The shop’s doing fine. It’ll be fine. There’s nothing going on. At least, nothing you need to be concerned with.”

“Fine. Just as long as it’s nothing illegal.”

“Just forget I said anything, OK? Next, there’s Penny. I think I’ll send her and Rick on a cruise. That should make up for how I’ve treated them. You know, give my blessings to their marriage.”

“Good for you, Vent. Doing nice things for your family.”

Vent North was trying to get right with the Big Guy, after all. He didn’t put it that way, but it was happening. Then, he got quiet again, sipping his coffee and staring at the sky, which was starting to clear up a bit. Sweedee then took another shot at the barn.

“So, Vent. Don’t you have three kids? Aren’t you missing someone here?”

“Oh, yeah. Chris. You know, I think he’ll be happier if I just leave him alone. Yep, the best thing for me to do is not bother him. Of course, I’d like to help him, but …”

“But?”

“If he’d ask me. But I won’t ruin his life again. He’s got his own ideas. Stubborn, like his old man.”

“That’s the stupidest thing. Even the Prodigy Kid’s dad thought he was dead. You don’t seem to care what happens to the guy.”

“Now, hold on!” he growled. “I didn’t say I didn’t care. I mean, I ask Lynn about him, when she hears anything.”

“But don’t you get it? He won’t know you love him, unless you show it yourself.”

“Chris wants nothing from me. He said so himself.”

“It’s been, what, four years? Don’t you think he might’ve changed his mind? You don’t have to give him anything. Just be there for him.”

“It’s too late for that. I’ll just come up with something to leave him after I’m gone.”

After that, Vent never said anything more about the kid. No point trying on my part even. And now he’s gone, so there’s no more chances left anyway.

And that just leaves this old gal right where she started, not sure what to do next. Meaning, about food and all. And believe you me, Ruby, it’s no picnic going without food. Been there, many a day. Once, a whole two weeks got spent with nothing but those little packets of ketchup to suck on. Made it through, but it was tough. After a few days without something solid in your belly, you start to feel weak and icky. You get to where you don’t want to do anything, you can barely stand up, much less sit down. And when you do finally fall asleep, you dream about food. It seems so real, you can taste it. One night, after a whole day without a single ketchup packet, there was this dream about roasted turkey. I hadn’t had that one in ages, but there it was, as hot and juicy and tasty as you like. Then, come wake-up time, nothing! But, hey, old Sweedee

survived, and a few days later, there was half a pizza in the bottom of a dumpster. Man, talk about crazy. It was just the crust, but for two or three minutes this old gal was in heaven.

Now, there's not even a dumpster in sight back here. Could try catching a fish from the river, Vent made it look easy enough. But chances are there'd be a big splash for sure, then Sweedee would be feeding the fish, instead.

Could go over there and ask those people. 'Course, with only one slipper on, the sticks and stuff would leave me hopping and ouching for sure. Feel kind of half-naked without that other slipper. I should go looking for it. But considering the luck, if any of them saw me, it'd probably be, "Hit the road, gal!" And once they've found out who's been living over here rent-free, it'll be, "Adios, Picasso!"

Gotta think of something. Need to get out of this place. It's just not the same without Vent around. Kind of spooky, you know. Keep thinking he's just gone to the store or something and'll be coming right back. No, gotta snap out of it. Get a grip, Sweedee! Stop pretending!

Don't worry, honey. Something will come, even if it takes all night. We'll get out of this mess sooner than peas from a pod. Just you see. The Big Guy hasn't let me down so far.

5

Chris

There I was again, sitting in that empty bathtub back at Twin Cedars. Only this go-around, I had a little more size on me, making the thing feel a bit more cramped than I remembered. Ol' Judy was snug in my lap, with me strumming away, all the while keeping an eye on that tub drain down there at the other end.

Funny thing. I'd always had this fear about open drains. Even as a kid, I dreaded getting too close the one in the shower, grabbing the curtain to keep from being sucked in. The fact that the drain was no bigger than a golf hole didn't matter. I cringed at the thought of slipping into depths unknown with no hope of return, plunging into deep dark water and being carried to forbidden places beyond all memory. Nobody would've ever known what had happened to poor little Chris North. A meaningless, endless free-fall away from everything safe, toward the uncertainty of who-knew-where.

And yet, somewhere—somehow—I just knew there had been some drain I'd stumbled into and through which I was still being swept. Or maybe it was Vent Junior who'd pushed me in. And whenever I came across another, whether in a swimming pool, a shower, or even that old tub, the sight of it reminded me of how foolish I'd been to stand too close—or to trust my older brother,

even. To let myself get snared, pulled below the rim, and swallowed whole by bottomless darkness, the very idea gave me the shivers. Still, in some weird way, just a hint of why I was where I was gave me this sort of perverted comfort, leading me again and again back to that same place—such a place as the downstairs bathtub at Twin Cedars, for instance.

And after all the earlier excitement with the shed, that's where Mama found me.

"Chris, honey. Are you in there?"

"Yeah, Mama. I'm still here."

"That's good, dear. Your sister's about to leave. Do you want to come and say goodbye?"

"In a minute."

"Did I leave my watch in there?"

"I don't see it anywhere."

"Thank you, dear. Now, where did I lay that thing?"

Yep, back in that same old empty bathtub, only this time with something to sing about. Rather, a song I had been working on. Didn't sound half bad, either.

Sitting in the tub with nothing to do.
Wondering what the others must be thinking of you.
There's two kinds of people in this old world today:
Those who just left you, and the ones who can't stay.

Had kind of a country-rock flavor. Funny. I used to hate country music. Back before I left home, it was nothing but rockers. But ever since, though still riding against the wind with Bob Seger, I couldn't wait to get on the road again with Willie and Waylon and the boys — oh, and slap me if I wasn't crazy for loving the one and only, Miss Patsy Cline.

"Hey, Chris!" That was Vent Junior at the door this time, pounding away like he'd done before. "You gonna stay in there all day, man? Penny's getting ready to go. Come on out and say

goodbye."

"Hold your horses. I'm coming."

"Just quit your stalling and hurry it up. They've got a long drive ahead of them."

But before getting out, I just had to give that song one more whirl.

Sitting in the tub just a ways from the drain.
Bet they're all still thinking that I've gone insane.
There are two kinds of places where a man will always stay:
Driving down the highway, or just lying in his grave.

"Chris?" That was Penny now. "Amy really needs to go. Can you spare the bathroom for a second?"

"Yeah, I'm done."

Have you ever tried getting *out* of an empty bathtub before? I can tell you, it's a lot harder than it seems. Bet it would've been just as hard for Daddy to climb out of that six-foot hole out front, but he would've tried it anyway, just to come and kick my butt for leaving home the way I did.

After landing on my feet, I took a quick look at myself in the mirror, the same one Daddy had been installing that day we'd argued and I'd peeled out. Boy, I must've looked like a dope on both occasions. Could've used a shave and a haircut, too.

I'd barely gotten through the door, before little Amy had it closed and locked behind me.

"It's a long drive, you know," said Penny. "And the one upstairs was just too filthy to bother."

"Yeah, I can imagine," I said, chuckling. "Like the place hasn't changed one bit, has it?"

"By the way, what were you doing in there anyway?"

"Just thinking."

"With that guitar?"

“It helps sometimes.”

“Well, all the same, it was good to see you again, Chris. So, give me a hug.”

For the first time, I noticed how short and plump my sister had gotten. A few gray hairs slipped through the dark curls, as well.

“Now I want you to know,” she started, “just how bad we feel about Daddy doing you that way.”

“Aah! No big deal,” I lied again. “I’m over it.”

“Just remember, if you ever need anything, Rick and I will be glad to help out.”

“Thanks anyway. By the way, where is Rick? Haven’t heard much from him since I got here.”

“He’s out by the van with Vent and Uncle Mack. I’m going in the kitchen to say goodbye to Mama. You know, Lynn says she hasn’t taken a drink since Sunday. And now she’s in there washing the dishes, of all things.”

°

OUTSIDE, the sun had dropped behind the woods across the road, leaving the clearing in a calm, mellow half-light. Treetops overhead and across the river were lit up with the last of those golden beams, while a faded half-moon sailed across the pale expanse.

Earlier, after losing my enthusiasm for hitting the road, I’d grabbed a plate and chowed down on some fried chicken, potato salad and green beans—funeral food could be some of the best eating—before going and seeking some of that quiet time in the downstairs tub. I was now feeling a little less anxious about my future, even after the things Lynn had told me. I should’ve been running like never before, but now I was pulling a beer from the cooler by the van and hanging out with the dudes like the last six years had never happened.

“You should’ve seen it,” Rick was saying to Vent Junior. “The minister was right in the middle of whatever they call that thing.”

“The eulogy?” I suggested.

“That’s it, Chris. And Mack here gets up, walks to the casket, lifts the lid and …” Rick paused to giggle, “… and says, ‘Yep, folks, that’s him alright.’”

He and my brother burst out laughing. Uncle Mack just smiled.

“And that’s not all,” Rick continued, squealing. “Then he says, ‘Sorry, Reverend. Thought I might be at the wrong funeral.’”

They were both now slapping their knees and spilling beer. Yep, it was good to be back.

“Oh, man!” said Vent Junior. “The things I miss. But, hey, didn’t mean to walk out like that.”

“What was it?” asked Uncle Mack. “Business call?”

Big Brother continued, “An old customer had a fender bender and needed a tow. But Mack, you’ve got more nerve than anyone.”

“I just couldn’t help myself,” Uncle Mack said. “That reverend was laying it on so thick, I thought he’d gotten his sermons mixed up.”

“You mean, he got his wee-gees mixed up,” said Rick, laughing at his own pitiful joke.

Uncle Mack looked at Vent Junior, then smiled and said, “Yes, Rick old boy, I guess that’s what happened.”

Vent Junior turned to me. “Say, Chris. What were you and Lynn so busy jawing about?”

“Oh, nothing,” I replied. “I was just trying to calm her down.”

Vent Junior shook his head. “I really don’t know what gets into that woman sometimes. She acted like a little girl, and like we were tearing up her favorite doll or something.”

“Maybe,” Uncle Mack added, “she was just shaky about your daddy’s grave being left open like that.”

“And it ain’t even Halloween yet,” said Rick, still giggling.

“Or else,” my uncle continued, “she got excited over that package. Who do you suppose sent it?”

“I bet it got shipped to the wrong address,” Rick added. “Maybe even drug money. You better hide it, Vent. I’m telling you.”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Vent Junior. “It was clearly marked for J Ventress North. Some doctor out of Atlanta sent it. I remember Daddy having some surgery done over there once. They must have overcharged him or something.”

“I never heard of a doctor refunding money before,” said Uncle Mack. “And in cash?”

“It’s funny alright. But you know Daddy.”

“Hey!” said Rick. “Maybe Mister Vent got it for that thing they’ve got going around. You know, that new legal thing everybody’s complaining about.”

“Malpractice?” I offered.

“Yeah, Chris. Man, you learned a lot up there in Nashville, didn’t you?”

“Birmingham.”

“You went to Birmingham, too? Wow, Chris! You really got around.”

“Well, Rick,” said Vent Junior, “looks like you’ll be getting along yourself soon. There’s Penny.”

It was handshakes and back-slaps for Rick, and hugs from Penny for everybody. Then my sister’s kids came and climbed in the van. Little Vent was about to climb in, too, when his daddy grabbed his arm.

“Hold on there, boy,” he said to him. “Where’re you off to?”

“Daddy,” replied Little Vent, “can I go stay with Amy and them?”

“Why, son, they live clear across the state. Maybe we’ll visit in the summer.”

“Hear that, Amy?” Little Vent hollered into the van. “I’ll come over next summer.”

After the goodbyes were finished, taillights were soon flashing for the turn onto the road and fading beyond the trees.

“Me and Doris should be heading out, too,” said Uncle Mack.

“Wait a minute, Mack,” said my brother. “I almost forgot. Why don’t we head inside for a minute.”

VENT JUNIOR HAD us all corralled into the living room, waiting for him to come back from the kitchen.

"Lynn's taken Little Vent upstairs," Mama said. "Vent Junior! My goodness, what's that boy's up to now? Chris, go and see what your brother's doing."

"No need, Mama," said big brother, coming around the corner with a tray full of wine glasses. "Hold on! Where'd Lynn go?"

"She's putting Little Vent to bed," Mama replied, with her eyes on the tray.

"But I need everyone here. Hey, Lynn!"

But Lynn was already halfway down the stairs. You have to remember, there was little chance of anyone going missing in that place, considering how open and spacious it was.

Next, my brother got the festivities rolling. "OK, everybody take a glass and form a circle. You too, Chris. Before Mack and Doris get going, I'd like to have a toast to Daddy. Wish I'd remembered earlier, but Penny was in a hurry to leave. Mack, would you do the honors?"

Uncle Mack cleared his throat, held up his glass and said, "To J Ventress North. Senior, I might add. The original Vent North. To the stingiest, stubbornest, oddest jack-ass who ever turned a two-bit operation into the most successful paint and body shop this side of the Mississippi. They said he was crazy to take on the big boys, but he did it—actually, he stumbled into it, after the main competition caught fire."

"Mack!" Aunt Doris said, frowning.

"It's true."

"Even I have to admit it," said Vent Junior. "Daddy was really only good at one thing, staying out of trouble."

"Here, here!" replied Uncle Mack.

"Evelyn," said Aunt Doris. "They're just kidding, that's all."

Mama just smiled and lifted her glass. "I've known Vent North

most of my life, and I'll be the first to say, he cared nothing for no one but himself. So, here's to the great J Ventress North. May he forever be happy with himself, alone. I know I sure am." Then, she drained her glass in one gulp. "I'm going to bed. Mack, Doris? You two have a safe trip home." Then up the stairs she floated. I know that's a terrible thing to say about one's mother, but that's the effect wine had on her.

Uncle Mack chuckled and was about to take a sip, when Aunt Doris took the glass from him and set both of theirs back on the tray. "We'll be going now, too. Come on, Mack."

Their taillights hadn't even cleared the entrance, when Vent Junior started heading for his pickup.

"Will you be gone long?" Lynn asked him.

"I don't know, baby. That fender's pretty banged up. It may take all night. I'll call you in the morning."

I walked around in the grass. A few stars dotted the sky. The blue had settled into a deep violet, and shadows on the ground were impenetrable. Only Daddy's gravestone and the blue tarp covering the pile of dirt shone in the twilight.

After Vent Junior's truck had skidded around the curve and sped away, Lynn came walking over. "Vent got Mister Joe to promise to come out Friday morning. It's a shame how things never seem to get finished around here."

"Just like Daddy," I said, "leaving it to you and me to clean up the real mess."

"Oh, Chris! I'm so sorry I had to involve you like this, but things had just gotten out of hand."

"Have you looked in there yet," I said, nodding toward the shed.

"I'm just too scared about what I'd find."

"Well, I'm not looking. 'Cause as soon as I do, that'll be it. I'll be stuck here. I should've left when I had the chance."

"Go on then, Chris," she said, crossing her arms. "If you feel that way, then just go. You know, I thought you were different, but you're just like your daddy."

Now, when a man gets told by another man that he's just like his daddy, especially if he's a Southerner, it's almost like him saying, "I'm proud of you, pardner." But when a woman does it, all the bleach in the world won't get that grease stain out of his one good t-shirt. He'd have no other choice but to turn it into a rag, thinking that he should've worn something different before poking around under the hood of a woman's will.

"That's it, Lynn. Rub that grease on there real good."

"Chris, what are you talking about?"

"Just don't let me forget what a dope I was for coming back."

"Oh, Chris! I'm sorry. It's just that your daddy thought I could handle this alone. And now you're about to take off, and I'm stuck here as usual to see things through."

"OK, OK. So, you've made me feel two inches tall already. None of this is getting us anywhere anyway. We might as well both go over there and have a look."

"No, let's wait."

"What?"

"It's too dark anyway, and we're both tired and cranky. Let's wait till morning when our heads have cleared."

"My clock's cleared plenty enough. Daddy made sure of that when he cut me off without a cent."

"You're right, then. You go look, and I'll just wait here."

"No way, Lynn. We're both looking in there. I'll get a flashlight from the car and we'll both go in together. Otherwise, we'll never get any sleep tonight."

Lynn stayed in the drive while I went to the car and pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment. If there'd been any gloves in there, I'd have pulled them out, too, just to keep my hands from getting any dirtier.

"Alright," I said. "Let's go."

But Lynn didn't move. It was like before, with her staring off into space.

I turned back to her and said, "What are you waiting for, Lynn?

Let's get this over with."

"Somebody's coming up the road," she muttered. "I can see headlights through the trees."

"You don't suppose Vent Junior forgot something?"

"I don't know. You go in the shed, while I see what he wants."

Peeved at my older brother's bad timing, I stepped just inside the open doorway and peered out toward the clearing's entrance. But when the vehicle turned in, it was no truck. A car came through and pulled right up to where Lynn stood. With one hand she was shielding her eyes against the undimmed headlights. It stopped several feet from her, with the engine left running.

The driver's door opened and a man spoke from behind the glaring headlights. "Excuse me, lady! I'm looking for Vent North."

"Sorry," said Lynn. "My husband just left."

"Your husband? Man, he must be going for the younger ones these days."

"Can I help you?" she replied.

"You have any idea when he'll return. I'm an old friend."

"Of Vent Junior?"

"Junior?" The man laughed. "No, lady. You're all mixed up. See, I'm looking for the old man."

"Oh, pardon me, but I'm sorry to say, Mister Vent's passed away."

"Aw, geez! That's tough. Listen, I haven't got much time. There're some things I came to get from him. Things that had been loaned on faith, you see."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's a package. No, actually, two. One should've just arrived, and the other he might've left stowed in his safe."

"Why, you must be the man Mister Vent told me to look for."

"Huh?"

"I can show you where it is. It's right over here in the shed."

"Alright, lady. If you say so."

The two of them were coming toward the shed, so I, not

knowing any better, stepped out to introduce myself. Boy, was that a mistake. The next thing I knew, the dude had whipped a pistol from his jacket and was waving it around. Woe, Nelly! I'm talking a big fat snub-nosed revolver. Believe me, Lynn wasn't the only one ready to scream.

"Hey! What's this?" the gun-toter hollered. "Who the hell are you?"

"That's my husband's brother," said Lynn. "Please don't hurt him."

"He shouldn't be jumping out like that, then."

I said to him, "Just take it easy there, buddy," still nervous as heck.

"They said nothing about any of this," he said. "Geez! Damn kids! They told me just to take the goods off North's hands and clear out. Great! So, show me what you've got. And no funny business, neither."

He kept the gun on us the whole time. I switched on the flashlight, hoping it wouldn't set him off. I needed to catch a glimpse of Lynn's face to make sure she was alright.

"You know," I said, "there's no need for the …"

"Shut up!" the dude responded. "Just give me what I came for. I don't like surprises. They make me nervous."

"It's right in that cabinet," Lynn said. "Just like I said. We haven't touched it."

"Open it, brother-in-law. You, lady, stand over there."

While reaching for the cabinet door, my hand was shaking something awful, I can tell you that.

"Easy now!" he grunted, still waving that gun.

At this point, I bet you're thinking that this should've been where we all got to see what was in that medicine cabinet, what had gotten Lynn so strung out. But before that, I have to do a quick fill-in of what had put us in this fix in the first place.

You see, following the earlier break-in of the shed and after everyone had gotten back in the house, not only had Lynn shown

me that she'd had the key the whole time, but she'd also revealed how Daddy had been a crook most of his life. I mean a real crook, plain and simple. For years, he'd been secretly working for this group of crooks called the Syndicate. And the trip to Atlanta? Not for surgery, mind you, but to meet with his bosses. His bosses! Believe me, I never thought anybody could boss Daddy around. Then, they'd given him something to keep, something worth big bucks. They'd then paid him big bucks to hang on to it, too. That was the money in the package Vent Junior opened. And Daddy had given Lynn a key to the shed, in case something ever happened to him, which it did, but then she started to panic, and that's where I got sucked in.

I knew I should've just rolled over and gone back to sleep after getting her phone call. But that was over twelve hours ago, an off-ramp long gone. I mean, isn't that how it goes? One minute you're rolling along with the cruise control on, next minute a gun's pointed at your back, the cruise control's off and you're losing speed. Well, you've probably never gotten in that position before. But I can tell you, it feels just like sitting in that empty bathtub: except, the hugeness is very real, the scum's not coming off no matter how hard you scrub, and when I opened that medicine cabinet, I swear, it felt like someone had dumped a bucket full of ice down the seat of my jeans.

"Hey! What's the deal?" barked the dude with the gun. "Where'd you stash the goods? Come on! Don't mess around with me."

"Honest, sir," said Lynn with a high-pitched shakiness in her voice. "Mister Vent said he'd put it there."

"I don't know what you people are pulling here, but I'm not laughing. Now, both of you, on the floor, face-down. Pronto!"

Lynn had no trouble with the nervous dude's instructions, but me, I had to maneuver around that riding mower.

"I've wasted enough time here," he continued. "They're not going to like this. Not one bit. Listen, I'm sending someone else in the morning to pick up the goods. Have them ready. Understand?

I've gotta be in Houston in two hours. Like I said, find it and have it ready. Now, stay put till I'm gone."

He backed out of the door and started to turn away, but then came back in. "Oh, yeah. Have the money ready, too. I know you've got that. They'll be here in the morning. So give them the goods and the money. Got it? Alright."

He then ran to his car. We were both starting to breathe again, when he showed up in front of the shed a third time. "Something else. Don't go blabbing to no one, neither. The Syndicate can't stand blabbers. And if either of you blab, well, then it's goodbye North Brothers, just like Brown's."

One more lift-off before another flaming re-entry. "And another thing. Oh, forget it. I've gotta go. Stay put till I've hit the highway."

Then he was gone again. We didn't say a word or move a muscle, until the car was out of ear-shot.

"Oh, Chris!" Lynn whined. "What'll we do? We've got to find whatever your daddy had before they come for it. But where do we look?"

"Better question," I said. "How are we going to get the money back from Vent Junior?"

6

Chris

After getting back in the house, we first had to convince Mama that the commotion outside was just some dude who'd made a wrong turn. Without a fuss, she yawned and went back upstairs. Lynn suggested we check the laundry room, since Daddy had used it as a kind of workshop. However, a locked door is hard to open, and a busted door would've been even harder to explain to Mama. Lynn mentioned her idea of taking Mama and Little Vent out for breakfast in the morning, to give me a chance to jimmy the thing. She then said her goodnight and headed upstairs, while I crashed on the sofa.

Having had my eyelids propped open for nearly 18 hours straight, there was no use fighting the force of gravity. And that's when it happened again. I was in dreamland, reliving the same one from twice before, each time starting with me standing in line at the box office waiting to buy play-off tickets for the Birmingham Ingots. Only four people stood between me and my fantasy of seeing the greatest basketball team ever take on the Lakers for the championship. Sort of a dream within a dream, though just as certain of taking a wrong turn at a certain point as before.

Of course, there hung that same sign over the ticket booth reading, "Play-off Tickets: $100." Expensive, but worth it. And

wouldn't you know it, when I went to count out the money from my pocket, I came up $9.50 shy, again. So, off went one of my sneakers to dig around for those last few quarters. That's when I felt something tugging my t-shirt and turned around to find this little girl who for some reason now looked a lot like Penny's Amy.

"What is it, Amy?" I asked her.

"My name's not Amy!" she whined.

"Then who are you?"

"I want to go home!"

"In a minute, honey. It'll just take a minute."

When I faced forward again, three more people were ahead of me.

"I want to go home!" the little girl who looked like Amy kept whining.

"In a minute, OK? As soon as I get my tickets."

Now ten people were lined up between me and the booth. How could this be? Something wasn't right. Someone should've reported those nitwits for breaking in line.

"Take me home, Chris!"

Next thing, and like before, the little girl who wasn't Amy transformed into another figure with a familiar face I couldn't place, only this time hugging a stuffed animal that looked something like a duck.

"Not now!" I said, growing annoyed with her whiny voice which had started to sound sort of nasally and grating.

I turned back, and the line had gotten even longer. I couldn't see the box office anymore. The crowd in the arena was already roaring, signaling the tip-off, and here I was without having gotten my ticket yet. And of all things, the sign over the box office now read, "Sold out! Disinherited!"—that last part was kind of new, actually. The fans started stomping the bleachers, like the sound of thunder from an approaching storm …

And that's when I woke up. I was awake and hearing a pounding noise on the backdoor. The cushions under me had sagged, making

it hard to get up. But rolled off I did, landing flat on the floor. Some more pounding, and me trying to get to my feet, with my socks slipping on the hardwood finish. I was in my underwear, too. By the time I'd staggered to an upright position, fumbled for my jeans, and groped my way down the back hallway, the pounding had stopped.

Outside, the sky was a light gray, and a mist floated in the tree-tops. All sorts of birds were already twittering away. Bits of gravel scattered on the concrete poked through my socks, making me do a crazy dance on the way up front. Who could've been coming around this early? No other cars were in sight except my Datsun, Lynn's Minivan and Daddy's pickup. While looking along the porch and scanning the clearing, I heard some feet go shuffling behind me.

A woman's raspy voice then grumbled, "Thought you people would never get up. Doesn't anybody know it's morning already?"

I turned just in time to see a flash of blue drawn through the back door. Someone had just hoochie-coochied their way right in, uninvited, like they owned the place. I ducked at the window and sneaked toward the open door. Creeping up the back steps, I poked my head in to catch a glimpse of this blue-styled intruder.

A short woman in a dark blue bathrobe and light blue pajamas stood in the kitchen, surveying the place. She had one foot clad in a fuzzy blue slipper and the other wrapped with a black garbage bag. Her shoulder-length dirty blonde hair looked like it hadn't been combed in a week. An unlit cigarette dangled from her lips. Getting the coffee canister open, she started scooping grounds into the coffee-maker's basket—slinging them rather, leaving a mess on both counter and floor.

"You forgot the filter," I said.

"What?!" she replied, turning her head and squinting in a way that really brought out the creases in her face.

"They're probably in the cabinet," I added, going and hunting there for the coffee filters.

"Filters are for wimps!" the woman grumbled. By now, she had the basket full of grounds and the pot sitting in the sink with the

water running.

Leaning on the counter, she asked, “Got any doughnuts?”

“Not in this house,” I replied. “Probably some cake left in the fridge, though.”

In the process of looking around in the refrigerator for leftover chocolate cake, I’d pulled out and was holding a small bowl of potato salad.

“That’ll do,” she said, grabbing the bowl from me. She then sat on a bar stool and began digging around in the silverware drawer.

Seeing the pot overflowing in the sink, I flipped off the faucet real quick.

“Dump a little out, will you?” said the woman in blue, with a tablespoon in her hand now.

Tilting the pot a bit, I let some of the excess dribble out.

“A little more,” she said.

More got poured, leaving about eight cups worth.

“Little more,” she added, gesturing with the cigarette.

The pot ended up half-full, and she seemed satisfied with that.

“You sure about this?” I asked her. “Gonna be some pretty strong coffee.”

“Aah! Bring it on.” Her next move was to chew off the butt of the cigarette, spit it out, then light the sucker up full-strength. Who does that kind of thing?

With the coffee maker gurgling away now, I took a cup from the dish rack and set it before her. The odor from the pot was already stinging my nostrils.

“Sure you won’t have some?” she said, nodding toward the pot.

“Naw, I’ll just grab a soda. Thanks anyway.” Believe me, I needed something stimulating, but certainly a lot tamer than jet fuel, let me tell you.

“Come on!” the woman growled some more, aiming her ire at the pot, tapping the top of its housing. After downing another spoonful of salad, she dragged the pot from the hotplate and dropped some thick black steamy liquid into the cup—which left

some still dripping and splattering and hissing in the maker.

"Look out!" I hollered, grabbing a dish towel.

She just stuck the pot back in and said, "Aah! Nothing you can't handle."

With that mess of coffee sizzling and popping, and the woman in blue sipping and munching and puffing, and me trying to wipe the counter and gulp soda at the same time, believe you me, this was turning into a great way to greet the morning. And to top things off, she even dipped a spoonful of potato salad into her coffee.

"By the way," she said, "name's Feathers. Sweedee Feathers. Got a paper or something around here. My cable's out."

"Sorry," I replied. "No paper around that I've seen."

"No paper? How do you people keep up with things out here?"

"Well, no one really hung around the place, except my old man."

"Yeah, a regular hermit he was."

"So, Miss Feathers. What can I …?"

"Sweedee. Call me Sweedee."

"Look, Miss Sweedee. I don't know where you're from, but around here people knock before entering."

"Hey, see my raw knuckles? So, what's the big deal?"

"Well, it's just that, you see, Miss …"

"Wait a minute … Miss Feathers will do better after all. It's more professional that way. Think, we're here to do business. Right?"

"Business? What kind?"

"Well, your dad had something he'd promised me first crack at."

Now, if you're starting to think like I did, then this might have been the person that gun-toting dude had sent to pick up the "goods" and the money? A bit strange looking, though, her just dropping in like that, still dressed for bed and all.

"So, uh," I picked up, "would you mind telling me what Daddy was saving for you?"

"You mean, you don't know? Man! You people are so out of touch."

“Hey, I just want to know what this is all about, that’s all. What’s the …?”

“Listen. Didn’t you know your dad was a painter?”

“Well, … yeah. He painted cars for a living. North Brothers Paint and Body.”

“No, no, no! Painter, as in artist. Get the picture?”

“Artist?” I set down the soda can and thought about this. Painting? Daddy painting pictures? Where did I miss that one?

“Probably kept them in his studio,” Sweedee said. “Should be more than a few for sure.”

“You mean, the laundry room? Yeah, Lynn said he used it for a workshop sometimes.”

“Lynn. Who’s she?”

After I described my sister-in-law, she said, “Oh, yeah. The sweet one. Met her a few times. She used to hang out with your dad on and off. Vent said she was good company and all.”

“Well, anyway, the room’s locked, and we haven’t found the key yet.”

“Leave that to me. Just let me finish my breakfast, first.”

I wasn’t even halfway done with the soda, before Sweedee had gulped down another cup of coffee, that whole bowl of potato salad and started on her second cigarette—filterless again, I might add. She had a regular rhythm going, too … puff, sip, sip, puff, sip, puff, puff.

Shortly, Mama walked in, yawning and blinking.

“Oh, morning, Mama,” I said.

Sweedee was in mid-sip, breaking her rhythm for a second. The change was very distinct, like a skipped beat in a song.

“Well, hello there,” Mama said to Sweedee, brushing back some loose strands of hair. “I didn’t expect company so early.”

“Mama, this is Miss Feathers from, uh …”

“Next door,” said Sweedee. “We’re neighbors.”

Some more skipped beats, during which Sweedee took another long drag and shot a stream out the corner of her mouth. That was

like the cymbal-roll for the next stanza. She then said to Mama, “So, had a rough night?”

A slower, somber beat. Mama drew her robe closer and brushed away some more hair. She seemed to have gotten much older since my leaving home, and even now looked like she’d put on ten years more than that, just over-night.

“Just tired,” she said, yawning a bit. “A cup of coffee should help. I see Chris was kind enough to make some.”

After I poured a cup and handed it across the counter, Mama put it to her lips, but then paused. Sweedee was sucking on her cigarette again. A half-cadence, followed by another cymbal-roll. They just stared at each other like that for a moment.

The expression on Mama’s face reminded me of that time she’d given me a wristwatch for my birthday, when I’d really wanted a telescope—sort of sad and bitter at the same time, lips slightly curled down, eyes empty, disappointed maybe. The look and the memory still made me feel awful, just as awful as that time I’d heard Vent Junior crying outside the bathroom door. But then, her face took a definite turn with that first sip of liquid mud.

“Chris!” She pouted and scowled, setting the cup on the counter. “Honey, haven’t you learned how to make coffee by now? Heavens!”

“Sorry, but I …”

I turned to look at Sweedee, half-expecting some sort of polite confession. But she just aimed her head toward the light from the open door and sipped away at her own cup.

I gave my best cover and said, “I, uh … must’ve not used enough water. Let me add a little extra.”

“No, dear, don’t bother,” Mama said. “Lynn’s taking me out for breakfast later anyway, and I was just about to go back up to get dressed.”

“Better dress warm,” Sweedee droned. “Bit of a chill out front.”

Mama gave her that same look from before but then let it melt into a smile. “Kind of you to offer the advice, Miss Feathers. Chris,

can I … talk to you … for a second?" She turned and walked back down the hallway.

Lynn came into the kitchen next. "Morning, Evelyn. Chris, … uh … Why, hello there, Miss …. Oh, I've forgotten your name. Sorry."

Sweedee twirled the cigarette in the air as a form of greeting, bringing the cup back to her lips.

"Uh, Lynn," I spoke up. "This is Miss Feathers. She's come to see some of Daddy's stuff." I pretended to massage my neck while rotating and tilting my head toward the back hallway, hoping she'd get the signal.

"Oh!" Lynn said, brightening up. Yep, she got it. "So, you're the, uh, …"

Mama was now calling me from down the hallway. I set down the soda and told them, "Let me go see what Mama wants. I'll be right back."

On my way out, I could hear Lynn saying, "I see someone made coffee." Glancing back, I caught a slight smirk on Sweedee's face.

Mama was standing on the bottom step of the stairs, peering back toward the kitchen.

I asked her, "Mama, are you alright?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she replied. "Just fine, dear. A little concerned about you, though. Do you need any money to get by?"

"No, I'm OK."

"Have you got plenty of clothes?"

"A whole closet."

"How about bed linens?"

"Mama, I'm fine."

"Have you ever considered moving back home. You know, your brother could probably use some help with the shop these days."

"I like where I'm at and what I do."

"Have you found someone, a girlfriend perhaps?"

"Oops! Fresh out of those. Got one I can borrow?"

"Tsk! Chris."

"Well, can't have everything, I guess."

Mama smiled, patted my cheek and said, “Oh, I’m sure one’s waiting for you to find her, right around the corner somewhere. Although …” The smile turned sour, as she looked again toward the kitchen. “I’d be weary of dealing with this one from next door. Not that I blame you. It’s just that, after all this time, here she comes like she’s some … Well, I won’t go into it with you. I just think you should be aware, she may not be all that she seems.”

“All she mentioned to me was that Daddy had been painting pictures on the side, something which I never knew about.”

“Just one of his silly little hobbies. Nothing special. Even so, just … watch yourself with her. Anyway, go see your brother at least, before you head back. Perhaps he can work out something, financially speaking, I mean. Be sweet, Chris.”

She then touched my cheek again and headed up the stairs. Mama was never much into the huggy-kissy thing with us kids. Most people would think that kind of cold, but I’d pretty much gotten used to it over the years.

As for someone who did seem on the lively side of things, there came Little Vent hopping step by step down the stairs.

“Well, look who’s up,” Mama said to him.

“Hi Grandma! Uncle Chris, you got anything to eat? I’m hungry.”

I motioned to him and said, “Let’s go see what we can scrounge up. Come on!”

“Scrounge? Sounds yucky.”

He then scurried passed me and started hollering, “Mama, I want some cereal!”

“No!” Lynn said. “I told you, we’re taking Grandma out for breakfast.”

“But what about her?” he said, pointing at Sweedee. “She’s got a bowl of something.”

“She’s just visiting,” Lynn replied. “Now, come on and get dressed. By the way, Miss Feathers, you wouldn’t happen to, uh, own a shovel by any chance, would you?”

Sweedee slammed her hand on the counter and shook her head. “My advice? Haul those jack-asses back out here and make them claw the dirt back in. There’s your shovel.”

Lynn was stunned for an instant, then said with a nervous giggle, “Well, thanks anyway. Just wondering.”

“You’re welcome!” Sweedee replied, then took another drag.

“OK, little man,” Lynn said to the boy. “Upstairs.”

While she headed down the hallway, Little Vent hung back, staring at Sweedee.

“I’m not sharing, little man,” Sweedee said.

“Aren’t you gonna get dressed, too?” he asked her.

“Sweedee doesn’t get dressed anymore. She got tired of getting dressed a loooong time ago.”

Lynn was now calling to him from the stairs.

Little Vent ran from the room, hollering, “Mama, I don’t wanna get dressed no more!”

By this point, the coffee pot was drained. Sweedee already had another unlit cigarette in her mouth. I wanted to get matters over with and be gone myself. Since Lynn had said she’d handle the money part through Vent Junior, I could just give Sweedee the “goods” then hit the highway. Right? Just forget about any of those half-hearted hand-outs from my big brother and split.

“I suppose we should get down to business,” I said. “I’m sure you’ve got other things to do.”

“Right,” she replied, sliding off the stool and pocketing the unlit cigarette. “But don’t rush on my account. Got all day.”

The bag on her foot was crinkling again, turning my attention to Lynn’s apron hanging from the fridge handle.

I said, “This, uh, isn’t yours, by any chance, is it?” taking the slipper from the apron and holding it out to her.

“Yeah, thanks.” She grabbed it and tore the bag from her foot. After getting fully shod, she stood up and said, “OK. Let’s go.”

“Wait a minute. Don’t you want to go get dressed first?”

“That sugar-water must be messing with your ears. Didn’t you

hear? Sweedee doesn't get dressed anymore!"

"You mean, you go around like that all the time? No clothes?"

"Hey, I'm decent. And it's the most comfortable thing there is."

"Just looks funny, that's all, you walking around in nothing but your pajamas."

"Doesn't bother me," Sweedee replied. "Somebody says anything, it's, 'kiss mine!' meaning this," shaking her fist, "not that," pointing her thumb behind her. "Nobody touches that without a ring or a million bucks."

"Kind of a tough attitude."

"Well, sometimes you gotta be tough. There are a lot of stupid people out there who need a little kick in the butt every so often."

°

SWEEDEE WAS LEADING THE WAY, but down the *front* hallway. Where was she going?

I tried correcting her. "The laundry room's around the other side."

She just kept going, only stopping at the bathroom. "Wait here. This could take a while."

The woman entered and closed the door, while I stood there and waited. What was she doing? Taking a leak? Unlike her, I didn't have all day. I then heard the toilet flush and some clanking and other fumbling around inside. Yet another minute passed. I was ready to knock, when a voice came from behind me.

"OK, North. This way." There she was again, standing in the hallway.

My head went to pivoting. "What the …? How'd you …? Wait a minute."

"Let's do this. OK? Come on."

I wondered whether there could've been two Sweedees. Not wanting to take any chances, though, I followed this one around to the back hallway where the laundry room door now stood wide

open.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"Never mind," she replied, entering the room. "There's the stash over there. So, give me a hand, will ya."

The room smelled of turpentine. I flipped on the light and saw several small jars and tin cans on the drier, all half-filled with colored water out of which stuck some small paint-brushes. Pieces of cardboard with various colored splotches were left on the washer. Pinned or taped to the wall by the door, there were these curled sheets of paper. I unrolled one and found sketches of the old shed, some trees, Daddy's pickup. Others had drawings of birds, boats and fishing gear.

Sweedee squatted at the open broom closet, thumbing through several wood-framed sheets of canvas, of various sizes and all leaned together against the inside wall.

"Just interested in his finished works," she said. "Nope," flip, "nope," flip, "definitely nope," flip, flip. "Ack! No!" Flip some more, then, "maybe, but no." Finally, "Ah!" She slid one out and handed it to me.

"Hold this, North. The title should be on the back. Let's see …" She lifted it and was staring at the back of the thing with her brow furrowed. "Hm, that's funny."

"What is?"

"Nothing." She shrugged and said, "Anyhoo, let's have a look at it first."

Sweedee reached into a pocket of her robe and pulled out a little handheld voice recorder. A nice digital model, too. Pressing a button, she spoke into it.

"OK, Ruby, we've got a canvas here by Vent North, titled, uh, … 'Dogwood Spring.' Yeah, you'd like this one, honey. There's a dogwood tree in full blossom, standing in the sunlight that's streaming through some woods. The bright blossoms give it this kind of halo effect, really dazzling against the dark greens and grays of the background. There's also a shower of blossoms and what

looks like …, yes, a straw hat on the ground, blossoms gathered around it like snow. The flow starts at the base of the tree, up the trunk then through the branches. They're like tendrils, nature's fingers, tossing confetti into the sun-filled air. A gesture of celebration. The hat signifies perhaps youth left behind. I see! There's the sparkle of water in the distance. Springtime. Gone for a swim. Very moving. OK, North. That's a keeper."

She returned the recorder to her pocket, flipped through some more canvases and came up with another.

"Here," she started again. "Let's see. How about we call this one, 'Catch of the Day.'" She had the recorder whipped out once more and spoke into it, "Ruby, this one's a beaut, too. There's a bass boat on the river. A man is standing in it with rod-and-reel curved in the air. He's hooked one. There's the spray from the splashing fish. Again, bright sunlight. The angler and rod seem merged, the arc flowing along his tilted body, then along the rod and line, and tethered to the splash which is some kind of mixture of teal, ocher, sienna and flecks of white. It has this flower-like effect. That's it! The angler as hummingbird, the rod and line as beak, drinking in the excitement of the catch. His jacket even flares like wings, the colors in it, variegated, a complex mix that can't be analyzed right now. The boat itself gives him flotation, tilting just so, adding to the tension. Everything dynamic, poised, a suspended moment. That one, too, North."

Once again, she went to digging in the closet, selecting two more. The same routine, me holding the thing while she described into the recorder what she saw.

"Who's Ruby?" I asked after a while. "A friend? Your boss?"

"What?"

I was sure I'd said that clear enough. But she just turned away, going and digging around in the closet again, pulling out yet another canvas. As she started examining this latest one, her brow furrowed.

"Something a little different here," she said. "Enigmatic even.

Hold it up there, kid." She stood beside me and retrieved the recorder from her pocket. "Ruby, this one's gonna need some later study, but for now let's title it, um … 'Hope Like a Tricycle.' See, there's this child's tricycle sitting among some creeping vines in the shade. The vines have entwined themselves through the bars, making it like some discarded toy or something. It's tilted away from the viewer, like a back wheel's missing. The pallet stays simple, just mainly the form predominating. Perhaps another metaphor for youth? Lost childhood? Death of inno—?"

Sweedee froze then clicked off the recorder and dropped it back in the pocket. She returned to the closet and pretended to look around for some more, fumbling with this and that. She then wiped a hand across her face and said, "Yeah, we're done here." Squeezing passed me, she was out the door.

I couldn't be sure what had happened. That last painting had gotten to her somehow, I guessed. Of course, by now I was pretty sure she wasn't the one sent by that dude with the gun. I mean, Daddy's paintings were OK, but nothing like valuable commodities, not even worth the threat from some antsy thug. I was studying the last one myself, when Lynn appeared in the doorway.

"Hey," she whispered, "did you find something?"

"No, not really," I said back. "She just looked through some of these paintings and walked out. Did you know Daddy was a painter?"

"Sure, but I didn't know anyone else knew. He always made out like it was our little secret."

"Like some other things, right?"

"I guess he liked me for some reason and figured I was trustworthy. I don't know."

"It seemed like you've met her before?"

"I've never spoken with her, just said 'hey' a few times. You do understand what I told you about her, who she really is?"

"Makes sense now. Anyway, she just wants to buys these from us. That's it. Not the one we were waiting for."

“Good, because that’s what I told Vent over the phone, that some woman was here looking to buy some of Mister Vent’s things. I didn’t say anything else, of course.”

“No sense in him finding out.”

“But now I wish I hadn’t said anything, because he wants you to bring them and her by the shop for his approval first.”

“What? Man, that figures, too, don’t it?”

“But what if the real guy shows up?” Lynn asked, cross-armed. “Did you see anything else in here that might …?”

We both looked around once more, but nothing stuck out as really valuable.

“Maybe it wasn’t here to begin with,” I said.

Mama was calling Lynn now.

“Gotta go,” Lynn said. “Just give Miss Feathers whatever she wants and keep looking. I’ll cover with Vent. I pray to God that’ll be the last lie I have to tell my husband.”

“Don’t sweat it, Lynn. What my brother don’t know won’t hurt him … though I’d like to myself sometimes.”

After stacking together those paintings Sweedee had picked out and taking another look in the broom closet, I could hear Lynn’s Minivan starting up and pulling out. So, I pulled out of there, as well.

I found Sweedee in the kitchen sitting on a bar stool, head down and eyes squeezed shut.

“Miss Feathers?” I tried rousing her.

She was mumbling something like, “I shouldn’t have said it to her that way. Me and my big mouth. So, just forgive me already, Big G.”

She opened her eyes, looked up and spotted me, with a surprised look, too. “Oh, North. So, how much?”

“Listen, just take them. My older brother wanted to OK things, but no sense in that anymore. I’m sure Daddy would’ve wanted someone like you to have them anyway.”

“No, this is business.” She took out a cigarette and set it between

her lips. “Remember? It’ll make up for all the trouble.”

“Forget it. No trouble at all.”

“No, no, Sweedee’s good for it. Just let me get my wallet.”

She started digging in the robe’s pockets. Then, she looked down the front of her pajama top.

“You take credit cards, don’t you?” she asked.

“They’re free,” I said. “I’ll even help you carry them.”

She was now shaking each pajama leg, as well as stretching the waist band. I turned away, hoping she wouldn’t start stripping in the middle of the kitchen.

“Now, where did that thing go?” she said.

“I usually keep mine in my back pocket.”

“Nah! It couldn’t have wound up back there. Must’ve been … in … there.” She was pointing at the front hallway, then headed toward the bathroom again.

I stood in the doorway, watching her peer behind the toilet, in the tub, then behind the door. That’s when I noticed the door to the hamper hanging open, with its hinges loosened.

“Wonder what happened there?” I said.

“Oh, that’d be me,” Sweedee replied, swinging around. “You see, it’s a chute from upstairs, comes down and out into Vent’s studio.”

“You mean, you crawled through there?”

“Hey, crawling into tight spaces used to be a specialty of mine. Now, getting out of one was always the tricky part. Once, there was this … wait a minute!”

She walked over to the hamper, knelt and stuck her head through the opening. “Aha! Ow! Darn it!” Coming up, she was rubbing her head and holding up a blue lighter. “Got it!”

“I thought you were looking for your wallet.”

“You think? Well, then. Must’ve left it at home. Just let me go over and get it.”

“I said the paintings were free. Take them.”

“On second thought, let me get this cigarette going. Boy, this one’s a must have.” So, off went the filter and into the toilet, with

the rest getting slipped between her lips. Her hands trembled, as she held up the lighter. The woman was sucking so hard and blowing such big clouds, even I was feeling a bit woozy myself. She then shut her eyes while gripping the wall.

"You OK?" I asked, stepping through the door.

She nodded and twirled the cigarette. "Yeah, much better. Feeling better now. Ooh, boy!"

The lid to the toilet tank was off, so I went and put it back on.

With her arms crossed, Sweedee took another drag while staring at the framed flower print over the hamper. "For the record, whose crummy idea was this?"

"Mama's," I replied. "Just her way of trying to spruce up the place."

"Well, it's crap. Had to cover my eyes every time I was on the seat over there."

"Daddy hung it up to cover the hole where the medicine cabinet used to be."

"Well, you oughta trash it."

Sweedee tried prying the frame from the wall, but without any luck.

"Looks like it's nailed in place," I said. "Wonder what he did that for?"

"Maybe to hide something. You think?"

Flashes of lightning could not have jarred me the way those words out of Sweedee's mouth did.

"Hey," she said, "you look like you've seen a ghost. Anyone special?"

"That's it! Hot tamale! The medicine cabinet. Why didn't I see it?"

"See what?"

"Uh … um …." I was trying to find some words real quick to get rid of her, but my brain decided to stall on me.

"Uh … um … what?" she asked.

"Uh, nothing. Tell you what, I'll load those paintings in my car

and drive you back to your place. What do you say?"

"Hold the mayo. You know something, don't you? It's about Vent and those thugs he worked for."

"What thugs?" I said, chuckling.

"Don't try to fool me. Bet it was dope dealing. That's it! He thought old Sweedee was in trouble with dope dealers and came to the rescue."

"Now, hold on. You knew about Daddy and the Syndicate?"

"Is that what they're calling themselves now? Yeah, figured that one out a long time ago. So, what's behind here? Drug money?"

"Well, we're not sure what's there. All they said was that they wanted the 'goods' back, whatever that meant."

"So, get a freaking screwdriver or something, and let's have a look. Here, use mine."

She reached in her pocket and pulled out this really short, rusty screwdriver.

"Where'd you get that from?" I asked. "The river?"

"Close. Kept it down in the toilet tank. Just biding time till the right moment to get this hamper door loose and see what was in Vent's studio."

I tried the screwdriver on the print's frame, but it gave no leverage whatsoever. So, I went to the kitchen, searched the drawers and came back with a skewering fork. It took some maneuvering, but I got the nails freed from the wall. Inside the hole was this large bundle of something in bubble wrap, kept in place with duct tape.

"Forget drug money," Sweedee said. "Might be the real stuff itself. It's in all the movies, you know. Think they call it a kilo. Could be worth millions."

"I've seen the same movies, and this looks too large for a kilo."

"Hey, they're always distorting reality in the movies. Has something to do with those little dots in the picture."

I pulled loose the tape and laid the bundle on the vanity top by the sink. "That's TV."

“Well, that’s all this old gal watches these days. Haven’t been to a drive-in in decades.”

I tried ripping the wrap with the fork, but it was drawn too tight. “Drive-in? Just how old is this old gal suppose to be anyway?”

“Well, she’ll be pushing ninety before you ever get that thing ripped open. Just pretend its Christmas, kid.”

I got the last of the tape loose and the wrap unfolded, and there it was. But what was it? You can quit holding your breath, because it wasn’t a bunch of money or that white stuff they show on TV.

Just some old painting, but definitely not one of Daddy’s. It was inside a weathered wooden case with a glass front. Inside were several flat strips of wood that someone had tried piecing back together. The image painted across the strips was of a woman wearing a gray hood of some sort. She had a small nose and mouth, but her eyes were large and soft, and in the middle of the whites floated these sky-blue irises dotted with black pupils, and within each pupil something like a tiny candle flame. It could’ve been like something a child would’ve painted, except for the eyes: they were amazing, just staring out at you, not with anger or fear or grief, though they did hint at some previous sadness. Still, there was a calmness in them, with a touch of ecstasy maybe? OK, OK, so I was talking like Sweedee now. I mean, it just rubbed off on me in some way. But let me tell you—and pardon the ragged cliché—I honestly saw heaven reflected in those eyes.

I started to pick it up for a closer look, when Sweedee shoved me back, yelling, “Don’t touch it!”

7

Sweedee

8:26 AM THU

It's making sense to me now, Ruby. All those years your old mom was on the streets, she was really on the lam … or brisket or something. Vent knew this and that's why he came and got me, to keep me from his crooked buddies who were out to frame old Sweedee for the stolen pieces. Think, there was the evidence staring me straight in the face. Straight and up-close, too. Couldn't even find a stupid magnifier, so had to get that close to it. These old eyes aren't what they used to be. Was a time when some print could've been spotted from twenty feet—brush strokes leave shadows on the real stuff, you know. Well, sometimes. Had a good eye for genuine canvas back then, too. That polyester crap was no match for these babies.

But this old gal saw it there nice and sweet, as plain as the halo on Mary's head. A Madonna, inside a wood and glass case, but without the child in tow. You see, there was this story about how old Luke—you know, the good Doctor who'd penned the gospel—how he'd once painted the Virgin's portrait. But most people chalked it up to myth and legend. Then later, they were doing some excavating at a monastery in France and discovered this vault, you

see, and inside the vault found these strips of olive wood coated with candle wax. Well, after being cleaned and pieced together, slam, bam, whoopty-doo, there stood old Doc's work as clear as the star of Bethlehem. They used carbon-dating and stuff, on top of some other evidence in the vault that drove it home.

Ruby, guess you're asking the same question as your old mom: what was Vent North doing with such a priceless piece stuck in the wall of his bathroom? Well, to clear things up a bit, a good smoke was in order. Didn't realize there was one still stuck in my mouth, till the kid said something. And good thing that toilet lid was down, too.

Did some extra thinking then. Since North had said the Syndicate was coming for it, and Vent had hung onto it for so long, there's no doubt he was in on the deal from the get-go, the art heist, that is. Even the kid found out his dad was a crook, but he didn't know how smart a crook, did he?

"I knew he was smart. Just not that smart."

You keep those baby-blues glued to the road there, pal. We're talking to Ruby here. Then the kid intimated how Vent had stashed the medicine cabinet in the shed and told nobody but the sweet one, and she wouldn't have had a clue anyway, even with a gun at her back. It had to be the kid, to figure things out and find Luke's Mary. Well, wouldn't you know, he was ready to hand it over to them and hit the road like a wimp. But Sweedee grabbed that one and said, "Hang on, Benedict! This is my ticket out of here. Besides, don't you want your share of the deal, too?" That's when he told me something about getting himself disinherited.

"I thought everyone knew. And FYI, they're blue-green."

Just the dumb ones, North. And don't go arguing color with an expert. Turned out, Ruby, his brother had convinced everyone the kid was out of the will, which was a bunch of crock! So old Sweedee set him straight, knowing how much Vent thought of him. Still, good old Bro was keeping the kid in the dark. My point being, "He laid one on you? Get him back." The kid acted squeamish about

it, but then I said, “Leave it to me. This old gal knows how to brew up the right medicine for smart-asses like that guy.” My brain was in the middle of formulating the concoction, when the kid went fiddling with Luke’s Mary. And it was like, “Hey! Be careful with that.” And that’s when I noticed something stuck to the back of the case. It was a paper, something legal that Vent had done. Here, let me read it.

It says, “I, J Ventress North, blah blah blah, along with so and so and so and so, did take from the Emmanuel Museum of Art in Atlanta several original art works, blah blah blah, all replaced with forgeries done by myself and two others. In addition, I do declare that Susan E. Feathers,” that used to be me, “blah blah blah, was in no way responsible for the thefts or the forgeries, being at that time a patient at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Atlanta.” And it goes on to say how he was forwarding a copy to the authorities over there. And there’s the news for ya.

“Guess Sweedee’s just a nickname then, right?”

Hey kid, nicknames are what other people give you without your permission. My name’s by design.

“Well, read the rest then.”

Oh, yeah, Ruby. There’s a note on the back to the kid from Vent, telling him to give me some dough—meaning out of what’s coming to him, thank you—and take me back to Atlanta, along with the evidence.

“There he goes, telling me what to do again. How about I just buy you a bus ticket?”

How about you just keep it between the lines, and we’ll discuss arrangements later.

“And the rest?”

We’re getting there. There’s also this stuff in a P.S. about how the kid’s not suppose to let me go browsing around in any dumpsters. Yeah, that’s Vent alright, always trying to get me to eat right. So there, the kid was meant to find this after all.

“Now, about this plan of yours …”

Hey, that's my line, OK? Just keep it below the limit, and watch that light coming up.

While the kid loaded up his dad's paintings, there was Luke's Mary still to re-wrap, and a long-suffering walk out to Vent's grave —the one those yahoos didn't finish. You know, just wanted to get in a few last goodbyes. The kid came up later, and mention was made about what the "J" stood for. I remember Vent saying something like, "Nothing," so I figured it was embarrassing, like Jonathan or Jerome or Julius even. But you know what he said? Tell her, North.

"It stood for nothing. Really. He told us he'd never had a middle name, but in the service they needed one for the record, so he invented the "J" and later moved it up front. You know, like the rich dudes did: J.P. Morgan, J.C. Penney. He just knew one day he'd be rich himself."

It takes more than money and a made-up letter to get a guy rich, believe you me, 'cause if he's not happy, it don't amount to crap. That's what this old gal had kept trying to get across to Vent all those years: get straight with the Big Guy and be happy with what he gives you. And isn't that what he really left the kid after all, the job of setting things straight?

"The money would've been nice, too."

Don't throw out your piggy yet, North. You'll see. Besides, it's not the money that's worth waiting for, it's finding those jack-asses who took off their tails and pinned them on me.

Hold on, Ruby. Hey, North! What's with slowing up here? What's the deal?

"Nothing. Just wanted to look at something."

You mean that little graveyard? Anybody you knew?

"Nah. Just a bunch of nobodies to me."

Hey, they were once somebodies, and don't forget it. Just like you and me … and Ruby, too.

"You suppose they ever found it? You know, happiness and all that? I mean, just to be dumped out on a street corner, forgotten

and all. No one even had the decency to carve their names."

It happens all the time, kid. People get done like that, whether they deserve it or not. But believe you me, they're not forgotten. The Big Guy knows exactly who each and every one of them is.

"Don't tell me you're one of those born-again types. You know, always going around quoting bible and wearing 'John 3:16' plastered on a t-shirt. What is that anyway? The mark of the beast or something?"

Listen, North. Watch your language, OK? That's the Lord's personal phone number, a direct line to the Big Guy himself. Just wait, one day you're gonna be down and out and needing to dial that number, but the line'll have been disconnected, 'cause you waited too late.

"Well, just don't go trying to convert me, got it? I'm a confirmed bachelor, that's my religion. And the only saving I need is for everyone to save their breaths from telling me what to do."

Don't think the Big Guy doesn't already have his thumb on you right now. There's more going on here than you've ever dreamed. Keep yourself handy, North.

"Speaking of handy, what's with the umbrella you took from the camp?"

Don't you know? It's gonna rain. Can't you smell it?

"What are you talking about? There's not a cloud in the sky."

Trust me. It's coming alright. Let's just get moving before it hits, OK?

"You sure you don't want to ride up front?"

Listen, kid. Front is for crew and steerage. Sweedee always travels first class. You hear that, Ruby? It's first class from here on out. Just gotta figure out how to pick up our tickets before the boat sails.

8

Chris

With one last look at that corner graveyard, we kept following Greenwell Springs Road until the exit onto Airline Highway. Down south of the exit, about a mile beyond the railroad and on the left, stood North Brothers Paint and Body. I almost didn't recognize the place. The front entrance had been extended into a bigger lobby area, and two new garages had been added on. Also, the old concrete parking lot had been asphalted, painted and fenced. Vent Junior had been busy spending the family's money, alright.

One thing hadn't changed. Parked right there just inside the fence, the old Duck. Now, I know what you're thinking: "Enough with the animal crackers, Chris." But what I'm saying is, that's the name we gave it, the old motor-home just mentioned, a kind of billboard for the shop. It'd been one of Daddy's first paint jobs, and that morning the sun was bouncing off its polished chrome and finish, all kept up even to that day. Some things never changed—including my brother, of course.

We were in his office, and Vent Junior was eyeing the painting of the fisherman in the boat. "Not bad for an old fart," he said. "What did you call this again, Chris?"

Sweedee blurted out, "Catch of the Day," then mumbled something even I didn't catch.

My brother's lack of taste for art was as usual a sure thing. I mean, if it didn't include scantily-clad women, then there was no worry of it ending up in his personal collection. After setting down that canvas, he lifted another, putting on yet another puzzled look.

Sweedee had immediately made herself quite comfortable upon arrival, sinking into one of the leather chairs in Vent Junior's office. She'd wasted even less time lighting up another cigarette, while keeping a tight rein on that bundle from the camp, like some player just handed the ball and making a stealth frontal against the opposing team. I was amazed at how contented she bore herself—content even to walk around half-dressed—like she could even make herself at home in the middle of a busy intersection if need be. For someone with nerve enough to sport blue fuzzy slippers as footwear, Sweedee invited a few snickers from passersby. She'd even left her bathrobe open on the way in, getting plenty of stares from both customers and shop-hands alike.

"What's this one about?" asked my brother, referring to the painting with the tricycle, turning it this way and that like he was steering one.

Sweedee shook her head and said, "You need to hold it so the signature's in the lower right corner." Then, from under her breath came, "Dumbo!"

"Oh, now I see," said Vent Junior. "Wait a minute. No, I still don't get it."

Already bored, I was scanning the far wall decked with photos. There was one of Daddy and Uncle Dick taken in '82. They were in front of the old shop that first day it'd opened on the corner of Airline and Peelwood Avenue. Not an ideal location, mind you, considering the deserted strip-mall next door. Believe it or not, the same plywood covered those store-front windows like it had in the mid 80's, graffiti and all. Uncle Dick then died just four years after the opening, and soon after that, Brown's Paint and Auto caught fire, lighting up North Brothers' fuse like a bottle rocket.

Other pictures showed Daddy with various politicians,

celebrities, businessmen, and even one of him with that actor, James Ramsey, who was in Baton Rouge at the time shooting a remake of *All the King's Men*. There was also an old family photo of us, with me looking so scrawny, but Mama so gorgeous, wearing a silk blouse and pearl necklace and with her hair done up in a Marilyn Monroe style.

"Anyway," grumbled Mister Art Critic. By now, he'd set down the canvas and gone and was propped on the edge of his desk—rather, Daddy's old desk. "I suppose, Miss Feathers, you must think there's some monetary value in these, considering how you seemed anxious to grab … I mean, acquire them."

"No hurry here," said Sweedee. "Besides, it's more of a professional interest. Your dad had some talent, no doubt."

"How much were you planning on paying?"

"Well, considering how he was self-taught and virtually an unknown, a standard rate would be in the neighborhood of, say, a hundred per canvas, fifty for the smaller ones."

"Sounds reasonable. Don't you think so, Chris?"

"I'd go with Miss Feathers," I said without turning from the wall. "She seems to know her stuff."

I hadn't quite figured out Sweedee's plan yet, trying to stay out of the way, you see. Whatever she had cooked up, Vent Junior wouldn't be pleased with forking over any amount.

After stepping behind the desk, spinning the leather chair once before seating himself, Mister Businessman Extraordinaire then leaned back with his hands behind his head and said, "Nevertheless, I'd like to check around first. You know, get a second estimate. Then I might consider your offer."

"Believe me, you won't do any better," said Sweedee.

I left off looking at the wall and took a chance on trying to hurry things along. "Maybe I should come back after y'all have hashed this out."

"No, stick around Chris," said my brother. "You might learn something here. I mean, Miss Feathers seems a rather confident

lady, and there must be plenty to back that confidence up with. Am I right?"

Sweedee let loose a nice long stream of smoke and replied, "There's a reputable gallery or two in my card file."

Now, I was never much for learning anything in school, always finding something more interesting going on out the window. From this point on I'd managed to occupy myself with the view through the large office window, watching traffic halt for the light at the intersection. I was studying the different vehicles and their various occupants, guessing where they were all from and might be headed. This was a good spot for it, too, being near one of the jumping-off points from town.

First up was this business dude in a white shirt and tie, driving a nice looking compact model while sipping from a steamy thermos. He then set his brew in a holder and spread a road map across the steering wheel, glancing between it and the traffic light. When the light finally changed, he shoved the map away and sped off.

"Let's just say," my brother continued, "that we, the family, that is, were to find a reputable gallery on our own, have them show the paintings and stir some interest, maybe enough to catch the eye of a few collectors."

"That's usually how the market works," Sweedee replied with a flick of the wrist. "Though it comes with no real guarantees. A good gallery's commission would be steep, then there's the control it'd have over how the pieces are shown, not to mention first choice in who gets to value them."

The light was changing again, and traffic crawled to a halt. An old pick-up that was three-cars back rattled under a load of furniture. An elderly couple was in the cab, and the old dude in faded overalls jerked on the parking brake, got out and limped around to the passenger side. He untied a rope from around a recliner, re-tightened it and limped back around to the driver's side. The wispy-haired lady was wearing a flowery dress and staring straight ahead, her lips pursed shut. The man released the brake

just before the light turned, and the truck lurched forward, spewing smoke from its tailpipe. The old woman started quivering, placing a handkerchief to her mouth.

"What you're saying is," said Vent Junior, tapping a pen on the desk's edge, "there'd be some risk in the trade-off. But wouldn't a bigger gallery mean better exposure? We could try New Orleans maybe, or Houston, or Saint Louis even."

"The bigger the gallery, the bigger the commission," Sweedee intoned before sucking some more smoke.

The traffic on Airline slowed again, and a dented mid-sized car pulled up, driven by a young Black woman in a t-shirt. A small girl sat beside her, and some stuffed garbage bags lined the back seat. The woman had her long dark hair half-pinned up, and sweat glistened on her arms and face. She kept blotting one swollen eye with a tissue paper. Propping her head on one hand, she traded glances between the light and the girl who was doing something in her lap, coloring perhaps. A slight smile then came to the woman's lips, and at the green light she gripped the steering wheel, took a deep breath and headed up Airline with a fixed stare.

"Oh, I see what you're implying," said Mister Smarty, propping his elbows on the desk. "We're just a bunch of hicks who can't afford to fish in the bigger pond. Is that it?"

"Your words, not mine," said Sweedee.

Vent Junior started chuckling. That chuckle could only mean he'd smelled a challenge. And just when I thought things couldn't get stalled anymore in this game, there went the rookie trying to sink a basket from center court.

"I see where you're coming from," he said. "You don't think we can pull it off. Well, I tell you what. You name the biggest, best gallery you know, and I'll call them, right now. I'll arrange to have Daddy's pictures put in the finest place and pay whatever it takes. Then we'll see if you really know your stuff, as Chris put it."

I spoke up then. "Vent, what's the big deal? Let's just find a local gallery and impress the pants off Daddy's old crowd."

Sweedee threw me this awful look and aimed a thick wad of smoke at my face. Turning to Vent Junior, she settled back and said, “Atlanta.”

“Atlanta?” My brother was piqued now.

“Cultural Capital of the South.”

“Atlanta.” He was rubbing his chin.

Now, maybe I nearly screwed things up—Sweedee’s supposedly brilliant scheme, that is, or whatever that was. But could you blame me for trying to run the clock down? I mean, what if those guys from the Syndicate were to show up? Someone needed to wrap up this gig quick and get the band on the road.

“What’s the gallery’s name?” asked Mister Eager Beaver. “I’ll have my secretary call them.”

“Emmanuel Museum of Fine Art,” said Sweedee. She was so calm about keeping the ball in play.

“You hear that, Chris?” He stood up and pocketed his hands. “We’re going big time with this one. None of that local stuff either. Those old hacks of Daddy’s wouldn’t know art from porno.”

“Atlanta’s quite a long haul,” I said. “How’re you going to get them there?”

“Let me handle that,” Vent Junior replied. “Meantime, I need to discuss something with you. A family matter. If Miss Feathers would just …”

Sweedee rolled her eyes and dragged herself from the chair. She flicked some ashes onto the carpet and said, “My consulting services don’t come free, you know.”

“Oh, we’ll work something out,” said my brother. “Just wait out front. This won’t take long.”

She tightened her hold on that bundle and sauntered out, leaving the door open.

To me he said, “Close the door, will you?” My brother had already dumped the fake smile.

I obliged, of course—took my time, rather. I figured I’d let him have his little say for a moment, then lay into him about the bull

he'd been spreading around the family circle.

"OK, Chris," he started, arms crossed. "Let's get something straight. You don't start a rummage sale until after the estate gets settled. Not before."

"She already knew about the paintings. And who was I to deny the rest of y'all your due rewards."

"Getting kind of smart there, aren't we?"

"Yeah, I got real smart this morning, Mister Executor and all. Particularly after learning that Daddy hadn't disinherited me after all. You just made up that crap to get back at me for the way I showed up."

"Where's this coming from?" my brother said, laughing. "What? You're a lawyer now?"

"Believe me, I know."

"Who? Who told you that?"

"A reliable source. What's the deal, Vent? Why didn't you want me to have anything? A bigger share for yourself?"

"You need to work on your act, buddy." He sat in the swivel chair and propped up his feet. "Stick around, and maybe I can get you into sales."

I planted my hands on his desk and stared him straight in the face. "Listen, Vent. Quit screwing around. Either tell me the truth, or I'll let everybody know how you and Wayne snuck into the teacher's lounge and spiked the coffee with … well, you know what."

"You really had me going," he said. "You know, you should do stand-up. There's a little club downtown, always looking for fresh talent."

"I'm not kidding, Vent!"

"Listen, Chris. I know you're sore and all, but just sit down there, and I promise I'll level with you. Just this once?"

I was skeptical, but what the hay. I plopped down in the chair that Sweedee had warmed up, strumming my fingers on the arm-rest.

“You want to know the truth?” he started. “I haven’t even looked at your portion of the will, yet. Honest. Daddy had it sealed. Alright?”

“OK. Where is it?”

“In the safe over there, along with instructions to let no one unseal it except you. I thought I’d just play with your mind a bit, for old time’s sake, then spring it on you. But now you bring in this Feathers woman, and that’s got me worried.”

“What? You don’t trust me?”

“No, I don’t trust her. Just think of it as protecting your assets.”

“I can protect my own, thank you. Besides, she seems honest enough to me.”

“See?” he said, sitting up and pointing the pen at me. “That’s where you got tripped up. She fooled you, then she used you to get to me.”

“That’s nonsense!”

“She’s trying to get something out of us, Chris, just because we have money. I smell a scam alright. Bet you she’ll even try to collect the commission herself. You watch.”

Vent Junior stood and walked over to the window, hands behind back. “Here’s what I want you to do. You’re going to take Daddy’s things to that museum in Atlanta.”

I stood up and said, “That’s over a hundred miles out of my way. I have a life, too, you know.”

“Just think of it as helping to expose a possible fraud. If her story checks out, then it’ll have been worth the inconvenience.”

“Why not just call the museum and confirm it?”

“Oh, I will. But in the meantime, let’s just say we’ve gotten the jump on her, as far as profits go.”

“This little game’s gonna cost me. What about gas and motels and ….”

“Forget that trash heap of yours. I’ll loan you something else, the shop van maybe, or perhaps … something even better.”

He was staring across the parking lot and chuckling again. But

this time, he must've figured he'd sunk that shot already, because the print-out was flashing from the score board.

"What?" I said. "Not the Duck! That old thing wouldn't make it passed Denham, much less down the interstate."

"The engine's still in good shape, and Daddy had some remodeling done to the interior. Real classy, too. I'll have some of the guys clean it up, check the engine, all that."

"Well, there's still the money issue."

He pulled out his wallet and opened it. "Here. Here's a credit card. I'll have your name added to the account. Satisfied?"

"What about Miss Feathers? She won't be satisfied being left empty-handed."

"Well, buy her lunch, then. After that, just drop her off wherever she wants. That should do the trick."

•

SWEEDEE WAS SITTING in the lobby area with a full styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and that tattered bundle in her lap. Upon seeing us come out, she shrugged at me and bugged her eyes, like saying, *What's the hold up?* I never knew a woman who could be in such a hurry to go no place special.

Vent Junior rested one hand on the lobby counter and the other on his secretary's shoulder. I never knew a man who could be such a pervert. "Darla, honey. I need you to look up a museum in Atlanta for me. It's called Emilio … Ezekiel …."

Sweedee sighed and said, "Emmanuel Museum of Fine Art."

"See what you can find, OK, babe?"

"Sure, Vent," said Darla, grinning while she wrote it down.

"You remember Chris, don't you honey?"

"Sure," she said. "I remember Chris. He used to play on the basketball team at Central. Remember me? Short girl with ponytails on the cheerleading squad?"

Recognizing her now, I said, "Didn't you used to date Wayne

Hadley?"

"Yeah, good old Wayne. Don't see much of him anymore. Heard he's up at Angola now."

"What'd he do?"

"Something about trying to blow up a building downtown. Vent, wasn't he in the Army with you?"

My brother laughed and said, "That was so long ago. Just let me know when you've got that museum on the line, baby. I want to speak with the person in charge."

"I'll get right on it," she said. "Nice seeing you again, Chris."

"And Chris," said Vent Junior. "Try getting here early tomorrow. You'll need to get a good start. Nice to have met you, Miss Feathers." He turned and waved before going back into the office.

"What about my fee?" Sweedee spoke up.

"Chris will handle that," he hollered over his shoulder. Then, winking at me through the closing door, "Won't you, Chris?"

Sweedee turned to me with a what's-the-deal expression.

"I'll explain in the car," I said.

The morning sun was already lighting up the parking lot from a steeper angle. Traffic on Airline had lightened up, as well, though it still seemed in constant motion like a two-way river. I stared at the Duck, wondering if it would even make it beyond the curb.

Daddy had talked of one day traveling the country in it. But Mama could never understand that. I, on the other hand, always thought it'd be the coolest thing, out there on the road, living free, no need to get any place by such-and-such a time. Well, I must have gotten to realize that dream before Daddy ever did, after that day I left for Nashville. Looking back, remembering the fight, him raising his voice, me raising mine, him grabbing my arm, me tearing away and cussing him out. Then, after he'd shoved me—did I mention how really hard he'd done that?—and started walking back to the house, I almost felt in a strange way, in a crazy way, that he'd wanted me to take him with me. And to think of the hurt in his eyes, when I refused. Yeah, I know. Sounds pretty stupid. Maybe I

was just imagining things. Guess it was my own way of making up for him not taking me that morning in his bass boat, and maybe the real reason I retreated to that bathtub: to dream of one day joining him on the river, where we'd fish and talk and plan our next escape. Man! A dude's crazy dreams about his old man. What a load of crap I'd come up with, huh?

By now some of the guys from the shop had come out and were eyeing us—eyeing Sweedee, rather. I was digging in my pocket for the keys, when she blew a puff straight up and said, "So, North. Did you know your brother's sleeping with Miss Ponytails?"

"Yeah, right," I replied with a chuckle. "And I saw Elvis in a bar last week. Everybody says that about a man with a pretty secretary."

"You saw Elvis, too?"

One of the shop guys started walking toward us, a young Black dude in paint-stained coveralls. I guessed he just wanted a better look at Sweedee.

"Seriously," she said.

"Yeah, seriously delusional. Look, she just works for him, that's all."

"That's how it starts. First, there's the after-hours catch-up, then the extra shifts on the weekend, then the 'Sorry, honey, but I gotta work late' thing."

"You've been watching too much TV."

"Pfft! If I still had a TV to watch. Besides, it was as plain as vanilla ice cream. Why, even the President's into it, or so I've heard. Didn't you see how he was pawing her like a gorilla back there? Trust me, it's happening."

I turned away, shaking my head. What nerve she had, insinuating such a thing.

Now, the dude from the shop was standing near the main entrance, grinning. I turned back to Sweedee, figuring I'd get her with this one.

"But he wouldn't do that to Lynn. She's the nicest person I

know."

"Oh, please! He's got her on a string, and she's totally clueless. Speaking of being on a string, what about the dough for my ticket to Atlanta? Did the two-timer write you a check or what?"

"Well, not exactly."

I looked away again and saw the dude approaching us. He had a shaggy beard, kind of like mine, and was eyeing me squint-like, still grinning.

"Can I help you?" I said to him.

"Well, I'll be damned," he replied. "It is you. They said it was you, but I didn't believe it."

I started eyeing him back, not really sure what he was talking about. That's when it hit me. The shape of his eyes, the facial features under the beard …

"You don't know who I am, do you?" he asked. "Who threw you that pass for the final goal in the District game, '91?"

"Mason?" I said. "Well, I'll be. Hey, dude! How's it going?"

"Chris North. How are you, buddy? Where've you been, man?"

We were clasping hands and laughing.

"Just came from Birmingham," I said. "Nashville before that."

"Nashville? What'd you do up there?"

"Trying to break into the music business."

"Music? Why, I remember you fiddling with some old guitar, but didn't know you'd try for the big time."

"It never really panned out. How about you?"

"Well, I've been at North Brothers for over five years now. Your daddy hired me. A bit of a character, but a good old dude."

"Vent Junior must be pushing y'all these days. Must've been an all-nighter y'all had to pull on that car."

"All-nighter? Hell, we hardly work weekends now. What are you talking about?"

"Vent said y'all had to work on some guy's car last night, a fender bender."

"We closed up shop around six. Don't remember anybody saying

they had to come back in. Anyway, I've got to get back. Really nice seeing you again, man. Been a long time. You moving back?"

"No, just down for the funeral. I'll be heading out soon."

"Hey, sorry to hear about Mister Vent. Like I said, he was alright. Never bothered us, just let us do our thing. Know what I mean? Well, you take care now. And let me know when you make that first album."

"I will."

Mason walked back into the shop, followed by the other dudes.

"All-nighter, huh?" said Sweedee. "Is that what he told her? Yeah, I could hear gravel spraying everywhere last night. In some hurry, alright. Must've wanted it real bad."

"Oh, stop it!"

A loud horn was blowing from the intersection. An eighteen-wheeler was stopped for the light, and the driver started waving at us. Sweedee spied him and made a signal like pulling on something, pumping her fist up and down. The trucker honked two more times, then Sweedee gave him a thumb's-up.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

"Yeah, one of my good buddies. He must be hauling something up to Memphis, this being one of his routes. Now, where were we? Oh, yeah. A matter of payment? Sweedee's got places to be, things to do, you know, like back east, turning in Luke's Mary and settling some scores."

"Well, you might not like this."

"Try me."

"He told me to treat you to lunch, and then maybe …."

"What?!" She then let her head bow and wag. "Remember what Sweedee said about cheapskates? Man! If a butt kicking isn't due or what."

She reached in her pocket and pulled out the recorder. "Here's another little piece of my posterior, Ruby. Never, I mean ever, deal with cheapskates. They'll screw you everytime." She returned the recorder and started puffing harder.

I pulled out the credit card that Vent had handed me, looked at it, then showed it to Sweedee. “He gave me this to pay for it.”

“Let me see that.” She ripped it from my hand and eyed it really close, then at arm’s length. “Gold card, huh? Not bad. And this baby’s brand new. You could get a lot of mileage out of that one.”

“What’s your pleasure then?” I asked. “Chinese? Mexican? You like Cajun? I haven’t eaten real Cajun in years.”

“Don’t worry about me. Sweedee’ll get over it. What are your plans? You going to do something with those paintings? This old gal would, if she could.”

I stared at the northbound traffic on Airline, wishing I was in that. That’s what I would’ve done, if I could’ve.

“Vent wants me to take them to Atlanta,” I said.

“Well, what do you want?” she asked.

“I really could care less.”

“Then do that. Just care less, but don’t be too care-less. Hey, that’s a good one, huh?”

“But what about the paintings? And the Syndicate wanting their goods back?”

“Let your brother worry about them. Just take me to lunch then drop me off at a truck stop. After that, you’re free. Think, that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

I was looking at the Duck again. Daddy always had to put his dreams on hold, what with the business loading down his shoulders and all. Now, things had landed on mine. I guessed I should’ve stayed in class and learned something useful for a change, like he’d wanted. Maybe paid more attention this time even.

“Maybe I should just listen to him this time,” I thought out-loud.

“Who, your brother?” asked Sweedee.

“No, Daddy. To hell with what Vent Junior wants. This is what Daddy would’ve wanted, to finish what he started.”

“How does anyone know what a dead man wants? Probably just wants to sleep. Could sure use some myself. Was up half the night worrying.”

“About what?”

“About those paintings. Couldn’t wait to get my hands on them. They’d look nice in a museum somewhere. You know, like … Atlanta, maybe?”

“You really know that museum over there?”

“Sweedee’s had some dealings with them.”

“Then why not come along. I don’t know diddly-squat about talking to such folk.”

“Aah!” She was looking off somewhere, like Lynn had done back at the camp. I couldn’t tell this time what it was, but I was sure it wouldn’t be something back at the river.

“Well, I do,” I said. “I can still add and subtract. You’re like me, nothing left here to hold you.”

“OK, OK!” she responded. “So, Sweedee’s broke. And homeless … again! Figured I’d con you out of those oils, then sell them before anybody noticed. But then you had to get Mister Ace-in-the-Hole involved.”

I was starting to wish I’d let her take them, like I’d meant to. She’d shown more appreciation than anybody around.

“Holy Sepulcher, North!” she groaned. “Wouldn’t blame you if you just left me on this street corner right here. You know, like those people back in that little graveyard.”

“What would you do then?”

“I’d manage. This old gal’s a survivor. Can take care of herself just fine.”

“I can believe that. But how about I hire you to help me get those paintings into that museum. In exchange, maybe I can help you clear your name or something. What do you say?”

Sweedee was looking at me kind of sideways out of blinking eyes. She would probably have slapped me for thinking it, but she looked just like a stray dog who’d been offered a home. I never cared for pity myself, so my conscience made me kick that thought out quick. I mean, she could’ve been a mind-reader, for all I knew.

But she just nodded her head and said, “Sure. Sounds peachy to

me. See, my plan worked after all."

"Your plan?"

"And you can stop looking at me like I'm some stray dog or something. Got my dignity, you know. What's yours? You gonna rat on old Two-timer? This old gal would."

"No way. I can't tell Lynn about that. At least, not yet."

"What's next then, Mister Nice Guy?"

"Well, the Duck won't be ready till morning. I figured we'd get a couple of motel rooms and …"

"Motel? Hey, Sweedee don't work cheap. Remember? First class all the way. Just get us a suite at the Hilton. Live a little."

"The Hilton? That place is sky high. Vent would never go for that."

Sweedee snatched the card from me again and waved it in my face, along with a cloud of smoke. "Hey, dreamer! This is partly yours. Your inheritance. Remember?"

"I guess a suite would be nice."

"That's the spirit. Could use a good bath myself. Get my clothes washed, get some rest, have a few doughnuts and some coffee. Then, this old gal will be ready for anything. Oh, by the way, let me borrow this for a while."

She started walking toward the gate, scratching her head with the credit card.

"Hold on!" I hollered. "Where are you going?"

"To that hardware store over there. Won't be long."

"What for?"

"A flashlight, in case that storm that's coming knocks out the power, and just when there's a bathroom that needs finding."

9

Hanna

It's so dark down here, almost not sure where I'm at. It could be a closet, or a box, or maybe even a hole in the ground. If it weren't for the flashes of light through the window, there'd be like nowhere. Like last summer at Grandma's, when we watched for fireflies in the dark. The places where they flashed could've been here or could've been there. So when one flashed over here, we said, "Here's one." But then it was gone, and we didn't know where it went. Then another one over there, and we said, "There it is," and it was gone too. But was it the same one, or a different one? Kind of like those flashes through the window: is it the same light or a different light? If the same, then either it's circling us or we're circling it. In either case, we're going nowhere. But if it's different ones, then they're either passing us—in which case we're still going nowhere—or we're passing them. I like that last one, 'cause I wouldn't want to think I'm going nowhere. I'd rather be going somewhere, anywhere than nowhere. I think.

Also, I'm not sure if I'm holding Babe or not. I'll wait for the next light through the window. There it is. Yep, that's Babe alright. Thought I'd picked up the wrong one. I wanted Babe with me, because he's my favorite. He doesn't talk any, but he likes to listen. And travel, too.

But who else is there? I can't see anyone from down here. I'll have to wait for them to speak.

"What time are they suppose to open?"

That's Mama. At least I know she's here.

"The museum director said they'd be there around nine tomorrow morning."

But who's that? Oh, that's Mister Jordan. He works with Mama. They're Private Eyes and going on a case. That's what Mama told me this afternoon. She was packing her overnight bag, and I said, "Where are you going, Mama?"

She said, "I have an assignment, my first one. But it's out of town, so you'll have to go stay with Grandma till I get back."

I told her, "But there's nothing to do there. Can't I come with you?"

She said, "There's plenty to do there. There's games and puzzles, and you can watch cartoons."

I said, "But I do those things all the time. Can't I go with you? I want to watch you work."

She then said how Clese—that is, Mister Jordan—wouldn't like that. And even if it was OK with him, the company wouldn't like it. She told me that she wanted to take me, but she'd get into trouble if she did that. Well, I talked to Babe and figured that if I took myself, then Mama wouldn't get into trouble. But now I'm not so sure. If she finds out I took myself, then I'd really be in trouble. So here I am, down here trying to figure out how to keep us both from getting into trouble. Hush now, Babe! Mama's talking.

"Clese, why aren't you wearing your safety belt?"

"It's only a few miles. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal will be me seeing you fly out the window in a collision."

"Allie."

"Alright, alright. But don't expect me to send flowers to your funeral, OK?"

Hope Mama doesn't get mad that we don't have ours on, Babe.

But Mister Jordan's sure having a tough time with his. There, it clicked. Hurray for Mister Jordan!

"There. Happy?"

"Of course. So, is this the disk?"

"Yeah, that's it. I copied everything I had."

"Some of this information's kind of outdated, don't you think?"

"About as old as you, hon."

"1975. Thanks, Clese, for reminding me how close I am to the rocking chair."

"You're still young, Allie. Got a lot of years to go with the company."

"I know. But sometimes I feel like it's been an eternity already. And if you hadn't recommended me for this assignment, I'd still be stuck down in Records."

"Like I told the Director, you're more than ready to take on the field work. You just had to get your head screwed on straight, and there's no better place for that than Records Division."

"Yeah, yeah. You keep reminding me: being a P.I. is nothing like on TV. But getting out there in the field, now that's where you gather the kind of info that can't be found in some computer file. Take for instance this resumé of hers from '73: Susan Edith Feathers, 28, from West Chester, Pennsylvania, has an MFA degree from Bryn Mawr and several glowing references. I mean, all this stuff is interesting, but it tells us nothing about who this woman is. She's obviously highly intelligent, an expert in her field, clever enough to pull off a job like this, but what does she eat for breakfast? What's her favorite color? Where does she shop for clothes? Those things can't be answered without getting out there and looking for the tell-tale clues."

"It's painstaking work, nonetheless."

"So how did you get involved with this one anyway?"

"Well, it all started way back, when me and your daddy picked up this guy who'd been mugged, stripped naked and left on a back street."

“That was when you and Daddy were partner’s on the force, right?”

“He was a rookie at the time, and I was bucking for sergeant. The victim’s story started out pretty routine, just some hoodlums who’d jumped him in an alley and knocked him out cold. But then this high-powered attorney showed up, and before we knew it, the guy was singing a different tune, telling us that it was Feathers who’d gotten her goons to work him over after he’d threatened to blow their cover. At least, that’s what they had us put in the report. To my mind, none of it added up, so that’s when I started digging into the case of the art thefts during my free time. Became something of an expert, I might add. A couple of years went by before I decided to quit the force and go to work for the company. The Director knew about my understanding of the case, so he handed me the file right away.”

Wow, Babe! Mister Jordan must be more famous than I thought. Probably rich, too. I know he’s got a big boat and said he’d let us ride in it one day. Maybe he’s gonna teach Mama how to be famous, so we can all be rich. Won’t that be great, Babe? There’s Mama again.

“Has a complaint here, where she once attacked the museum director. What’s that about?”

“According to Miss Gillespie, the woman in charge, Feathers used to stay after hours a lot, then things would wind up missing the next morning. When she confronted her about it, Feathers went berserk, knocked her around a bit then threatened to kill her if she didn’t keep quiet.”

“Man! The woman must be a real psycho. You sure we’re cut out for this? I mean, shouldn’t the police or the FBI be going after her?”

“The company paid out big bucks on those claims, Allie. The Director wants to be certain that these paintings are the stolen works.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Why are we going after Feathers?”

“Look, it’s possible she could be hooking up with the rest of the gang. We’re just going to watch her, that’s all.”

“Then, there’s no possibility of us getting shot at, is there?”

“None.”

“What was that alias you said she’s using now?”

“Sweedee. Sweedee Feathers.”

Sweedee? That’s a funny name. She sounds kind of nice. But Mister Jordan says she’s not so nice. How can someone with a name like Sweedee not be nice? But if she’s on a cycle and in a gang, like Mama says, she might be a mean person. I can see why Mama didn’t want me to come along, this lady could be crazy. I better stay back here where it’s safe. But it’s kind of cold on the floor board. Why don’t they turn up the heat? Mama said it’s a long long ways to Baton Rouge. I’m not sure I can stay down here that long. I’m starting to wish I hadn’t snuck behind the seat, while Mama was talking to Grandma. I guess Grandma has figured out by now that I’m not in my room. I had to be real quiet climbing out the window and getting in the car before she left. I’m glad I got behind the other seat, because Mama let Mister Jordan drive and he’s a big man and he put his way back. I could’ve been squooshed over there.

Mama’s saying, “We’ve got thirty minutes till our flight leaves. I hope we make it in time.”

“Relax, Allie. We’ve got plenty.”

“I guess it’s just first time jitters.”

A plane? They’re going on a plane? I don’t know how to take myself in a plane. I’ve got to think of some way to stay with them. Don’t worry, Babe, we’ll come up with something. Now what’s Mister Jordan talking about?

“Have you heard again from Jack?”

“He’s late with the child support, as usual. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s skipped the state by now.”

That’s Daddy they’re talking about, Babe. I hardly ever saw him much when he lived with us, but when I did, he always seemed real tired, like he didn’t want to even look at me when he got home.

Mama would keep saying, “But Jack, she’s your daughter. You need to spend more time with her.” But then he’d get mad and go in a room by himself until he had to go to work again. She started crying a lot, after he’d gotten some of his things and left.

Now Mister Jordan’s talking. “I still can’t understand the guy. I mean, I know he had some problems with his job, but with those kind of things you just have to let them go sometimes and relax.”

“Jack never could handle stress that well. Even after Hanna was born and the doctors said she’d need the treatments for only about the first six months, he acted like he couldn’t stand it any longer. And just when I needed him the most, he decided to go off to that stupid conference. And wouldn’t you know it, the slut was there, as well. Man, I could’ve shot them both.”

“Good thing you’d just turned in your service revolver. Well, I guess I over-estimated the guy, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You just introduced us, that’s all. At least, I got one good thing out of the deal. And I wouldn’t part with her for all the money in the world.”

You hear that, Babe? Maybe she won’t be so mad after all, maybe she’ll even let us go with her. We’ll get to ride in the plane. Won’t that be fun, Babe? Mama just has to talk to Mister Jordan. I know he’s got children and grandchildren of his own. He shouldn’t mind. Mama says he’s been a friend of the family for a long time. He’s always been nice to me. He even said he’d take me on his boat when he gets tired again. Remember, Babe?

“See, Allie? There’s the airport now. Right on time. The company left tickets for us at the counter, so all we have to do is drop off our luggage and head for the terminal.”

“I still wish I could’ve brought her along. I don’t like just rushing off this way.”

“It’s company business, Allie. Besides, she’ll be fine with Carol. We shouldn’t be gone more than a couple of days. She’ll hardly have the chance to miss you.”

“But I miss her already. She’s all I’ve got.”

Mama's really going to be thrilled to see me. But I'm still not sure about Mister Jordan. He seems so serious about my not coming along. We'll just let Mama do the talking. Now, Babe, we're going to have to be really good on this trip. We don't want Mama getting into trouble, it being her first us-eye'mint and all. But I'd just like to get a good look at that Sweedee lady, just once to see how crazy she really is. Mister Jordan had said how she even ran away once. I wonder if she gets lonely out there. I know I would with no one around that I knew. But Mister Jordan seems to know her. Maybe when she sees him, she'll be nice and won't attack us, like she did that other lady. I wonder why she got so mad at her that she had to attack her. Maybe she said something mean to Sweedee, like the way Lizzy keeps saying mean things to me on the playground. But Lizzy's bigger, and I don't think I could attack her without getting beat-up. So Sweedee must have been really big, or the other lady really small, to keep from getting beat-up herself. She must have been tough, like Lizzy, maybe even tougher since she attacked a lady. Babe, I think we'd better let Mama and Mister Jordan handle Sweedee. Don't you?

The lights are staying in the window longer, so we must be slowing down. Now, the engine's stopped, and that means we're there. Let's let them get out first.

I can hear Mister Jordan. "We'll have to take the tram to the terminal from here. There's a counter just inside. I'll get the tickets while you wait by the platform."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Let's wait till they've walked away. We'll have to keep up with Mama if we want to take the tram with them, whatever a tram is. OK, Babe. Let's go.

There's Mama, but don't let her see us. That must be the tram over there. It looks like an indoor train. There's Mister Jordan coming. Quick, let's hide behind this man. There they went, inside that electric door. Hurry, Babe! Watch out, Mister! That was close. Now the doors are closed and the tram is moving. We better hold

on.

°

THAT WAS SOME RIDE. I wonder where we're at now. There goes Mama and Mister Jordan. Let's not lose them, Babe. Come on. Boy, there's a lot of people in this place. It's getting harder and harder to see Mama through the crowd. OK, Babe, look for a blonde lady in a dark jacket and pants. There she …! No, that's not her. Where could she be?

Oh, Babe! I hope they haven't left on the plane yet. We'll be in terrible trouble then.

"Flight 153 to Baton Rouge now boarding at Gate 8A."

Where's that voice coming from? Maybe it's God telling us where to find them. Thank you, God! 7A … 7C … 7E. Where do the 8's begin. 7G … 8A. There it is, Babe! But where are they? Let's look for Mister Jordan. He's a big fellow in a suit. No, not that one. That one's got hair on his face. Oh, there he is. And there's Mama, too. We found them, Babe!

Mama!

"Oh, my goodness! Hanna! How in heaven's sake did you get here?"

I hid behind the seat. Please take me with you.

"What the … Allie?"

"But Clese."

"She's got to go back. Company policy, remember? And besides, I don't have an extra ticket for her."

"But there's no time to take her back. Young lady, I ought to spank you."

"Maybe we can leave her with airport management and have Carol pick her up."

No, Mama, take me with you. I'll be good. Me and Babe will stay out of the way, while you and Mister Jordan handle Sweedee.

"Hanna, it's not nice listening in on other people's business."

“Allie, we’ve got to go. Now what’s it going to be? If you want the field work, you’ve got to learn to make some sacrifices.”

“I’ll take responsibility for her. I’ll buy her ticket and pay her expenses out of my own pocket, if I have to. I just can’t leave her with strangers. You said this assignment shouldn’t take long.”

“But there’s no telling what we’re up against. Things could get rough, if there’s trouble.”

“But you said we’re not going there to catch the bad guys, just investigate. Now, honey, you’ll have to be real good and listen to everything I say.”

I will, Mama. Babe will, too.

“Alright, Allie. We’ve got fifteen minutes till the plane leaves.”

Mama’s having a hard time getting the lady behind the counter to give me a ticket.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but the plane’s booked up.”

“But she can sit on my lap.”

“The airline has safety rules about that. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. What was I thinking?”

Who’s this man trying to squeeze in front of us?

“Is it too late to get a refund on this ticket?” he’s saying. “They just took my wife to the hospital, and I’ve got to get there quick.”

Why is she helping him? Has she forgotten about us?

“Yes, sir. Just go back to the main terminal, and they’ll help you there.”

“Ah, thank you!”

“Well, ma’am,” she’s saying to Mama, “This is your lucky day. That just opened up a seat on your flight, but you won’t be able to sit together.”

Mama’s saying, “That’ll be fine.”

Oh, goody! We get to go. Babe, I hope they let you sit on my lap. There’s not another seat left.

“Come on, honey.”

Here we go.

Mister Jordan sure looks at his watch an awful lot. “Did you get

it?"

"Yeah, just in the nick of time."

"OK, let's go. Now you be good, little lady, or you'll have to swab the deck on my boat before we can go sailing together. Good thing there's no extra luggage, just that stuffed toy of hers."

"So, what's the plan on arrival?"

"We'll rent a car, then get a motel room. In the morning we'll head over to North Car Care, secure the paintings, then try to pick up the scent from there."

"But, what if she's already left town? There's a lot of directions she could head in."

"That may be the least of our problems. I'm just hoping we don't run into any of that."

"Run into what?"

"That."

Mister Jordan's pointing at a TV across the room. There's a man on the screen waving at a big map. I know from my gee-oguhfy book that that's the United States. But what the man keeps waving at is this big long rainbow drawn across the map. I don't see what Mister Jordan is so worried about. It's just a rainbow, but with lots more reds and yellows in it than blues and greens. And from the looks of it, if I remember where we are on the map, it seems to be coming our way. Maybe we'll see it from the plane. Babe, I'm glad we got to come along. Aren't you?

10

Sweedee

10:37 PM THU

Well, here's your old mom, Ruby, sitting on a bed the size of Pennsylvania, somewhere near the top of the great Baton Rouge Hilton hotel, and you want to know what's on TV?

"And now for more of our coverage of those three whales still trapped up near Alaska."

Stupid whales.

"95 down! 95 a month! And they're going fast!"

Stupid car commercials.

"Phasers on stun!"

Stupid reruns.

"Now the Ingots have a 20-point lead at the half."

Stupid ball-game.

"Ladies! Just 13 more to go of these …"

Stupid junk.

"And it looks like that storm system will be drenching the lower Mississippi valley …"

More stupid reruns. Nothing but stupid stuff on. Listen, Ruby, no matter how much money you've got or how fancy the digs you stay in, you've still gotta watch the same crap on TV. My thumb's sore,

so guess I'll go soak it in the tub awhile before bedtime.

11:03 PM THU

Ruby, you'd love this. Your old Mom is sitting chest-deep in a sea of bubbles. We're talking a foaming ocean here. Man! This thing's as big as a swimming pool. Catch you on the far shore, honey.

11:04 PM THU

Boy, what a work-out! Felt good, too. Haven't swam that far in, well, who knows. And get a load of the setup? Got a box of doughnuts over there and another over here.

You know, your old mom used to be a pretty good swimmer. Back in college, could do five or six laps easy. Used to go to the Rec Center everyday with two pals, Kathy and Joan. Would've all been on the swim team, if they'd had one.

After college, Kathy and Joan went off and got married, while fish-out-of-water headed straight for Grad School. Bryn Mawr. Everyone called it "Been to Maui", the art school was so laid back. That's where my MFA came from. You know, MFA, "Might Find A (Job)." Well, your mom went looking for hers by sending out resumés to every museum and art gallery on the list. Had a stack of rejects so high, could've stood on it and changed a light bulb. But stuck it out anyway, still dreamed of someday becoming a big mover and quaker in the old art scene. Paid off, too. Think, never been further south than D.C., and that was just for a high school trip. But then, that chance to go to Atlanta? Now, that was scary.

Back then, this little gal must've been one head-over-heels wimp. Susan Edith Feathers, A-number-1 introvert. Only peeked out of her shell when she was swimming laps with her friends. But the rest of the time? Well, let me tell you about Susan. Call this, "the Saga of Susan," or better still, "Goodbye Innocence." Yeah, that sounds like a good one.

Susan started out as this mousy, wimpy, shy, nerdy type. Never had a real boyfriend in her life, but she did have her ambitions. Of course, there was the money that needed borrowing, if she wanted to make it in time for the interview. But things turned out OK, better than she'd dreamed. Think, they practically hired her before she'd even gotten through the door.

Emmanuel Museum of Fine Art. Miss Katherine Gillespie, Director. She told Susan she liked being called Missy Kitty, with that grin and those fake eyelashes batting. And Susan would be the type to go and think that this woman was somebody. Oh, yeah. The broad had this stupid stock phrase of hers, like, when things didn't quite go Susan's way, Miss Kitty would just grin and bat and say, "Oil well. So it goes, it goes, it goes." Think, yuck! Just her little way of trying to sugar-coat a kick in the butt, if you ask this gal.

"Well, Miss Feathers," she said to Susan after that quick interview, "I'm really impressed with your presentation. And it just so happens that all of the other candidates have taken jobs elsewhere, leaving only you. Now, isn't that something?"

"You mean, I got the job?" said a stunned and gullible Susan.

"It certainly looks that way. Now, all you have to do is fill out these papers for me, and don't forget to sign each and every one. It's very important that you do."

"But shouldn't I find a place first and get settled? I don't even have a phone."

"Oh, I'm sure you can work out those little details over the weekend. Just be here Monday morning bright and early."

"That soon? All of my clothes and things are still back in Pennsylvania."

"But we really need you to start as quickly as possible. I'll see that you get a little cash advance, right after you finish filling out and signing these papers."

She then loaded down Susan with a hefty stack of forms.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Miss Kitty said. "We'll also need a sample of your fingerprints for our files."

“Uh, why do you need my …”

“Our security program. It keeps insurance rates low, you see.”

“I understand.”

“And I’ll also need a recent photograph.”

“I don’t think I have one handy. Maybe if I …”

“And you’ll be required to undergo a complete mental and physical examination, as well.”

“Wow! I never expected to be dealing with so much so soon. Just wish I were better prepared.”

“Oil well. So it goes, it goes, it goes.”

And that’s all she left with poor Susan, a pile of teeth and plenty of mascara. Yeah, there was that cash advance alright, 150 stinking bucks. She still owed her landlord 200 after signing the lease, and had to hock her watch to buy groceries.

Some weeks went by before things started settling down. Life was going pretty smooth. Then, Gus showed up. He was one of the security guards at the museum, a real jerk who kept hanging around wherever Susan was. And he was always making some lewd remark, just to see what sort of reaction it’d get from her. He kept trying to talk her into going with him to this dumpy bar clear across town, saying how it was near his place and if it got too late, well, then … Yeah, that jerk had just one thing on his mind, if it were possible to get that much through that p-brain of his, even. She thought she could get rid of the louse after hours, but then, he learned her phone number and started calling late at night, wanting to know what “Lil’ Susie” was wearing.

Now, about Susan’s job. All she did all day was collect and sort art submissions, and keep records in the archives. That’s right, paper pushing. Some struggling painter would fill out an application and leave a sample of his work, then Susan would check the qualifications, catalog the painting and at the end of the week present a report to Miss Kitty.

“Now then, Miss Feathers. What do you have for us today?”

This was Susan’s first report, and she was so nervous about it.

“Here are this week’s submissions. There were some, uh, others with, you know, incomplete applications and all, but I was thinking that, uh, maybe we shouldn’t write them off so quick. Think, perhaps, uh, you might … perhaps … consider …” Head bowed, nervously handing the folders across the desk.

“You *think*? Why, Miss Feathers. What made you think your job here was to, well, how shall I put it, *think*?”

“It was just a suggestion. Sorry to be a bother, but there were several that showed real potential and the artists seemed so sincere.”

“Miss Feathers, do I need remind you that I hired you only because there were no other candidates? Now, you must realize that I can’t afford having one of my underlings second-guessing museum management.”

“But if you would just take a look at them yourself, I’m sure you’d see …”

“Sorry, Miss Feathers. Only those submissions that meet the qualifications.”

“It was just a suggestion.”

“Oil well. So it goes, it goes, it goes.”

Listen, Ruby. There was something definitely screwy about that woman. Even during lunch breaks, she would lock her door and play heavy metal music. Sometimes, Susan could hear her running around in there, whooping and laughing. No kidding! Then afterwards, things got quiet except for the music still blaring.

But she never gave poor Susan much of a break, piling more crap on her, not allowing her mind to function for a minute.

Then came Gus again, hounding her to go out with him. That loser! And how did he get the job of guarding the place anyway? Did they really look into his background first? Might’ve been a few arrests back there for being a pervert.

One thing’s for sure. It had to have been that jerk who broke into Susan’s apartment while she was away that Christmas. It was so wonderful seeing her parents again, even though her dad must’ve

been on his last leg by then. Yeah, just a matter of time with her dear old dad. Then, to come back and find her place torn up, especially the closet and underwear drawer. Yeah, it was Gus alright. But Susan was too much of a wimp to report it, or even confront the fiend. Gave her a few sleepless nights, as well. There was simply no one she felt she could turn to, either. The other two who worked at Emanuel, Tara and Jude, were too full of themselves.

Then came the missing file folders. Susan was keeping excellent records, or so she thought. But when Miss Kitty dropped in one day after New Years and asked for such and such's folder, it was just gone, along with some others. Of course, the whole thing got laid on poor Susan. Didn't look too good at the ninety-day review, either.

"Well, Miss Feathers," Miss Kitty said, grinning. "Are you happy with your work here? I mean, from what I've seen, I'm left with some serious doubts about your level of contentment."

"Things have been, uh, difficult lately, I have to admit. But I'm trying to do better. If you'd only give me some more time, I …"

"Why, you've had three months already. I have to admit for myself that your credentials at hiring don't seem to have lived up to their billing. Sad to say, but I'll have to take measures, for the museum's sake, you understand. There'll be a slight reduction in your pay."

"But I'm already struggling with what I make now."

"Sorry, but we must all do our part, and mine is to keep the museum budget in balance. If you have any trouble doing your part, please let me know so I can arrange to have the position reopened."

"But you're putting me in a tight spot. How can I keep my job and make a living, too? This doesn't seem fair."

"Oil well, Miss Feathers. So it goes, it goes, it goes. Now, do be sweet and shut the door on your way out."

Tara and Jude had a party over that one, snickering to each other, as poor Susan trudged back to her desk. And then comes Gus,

sneaking from behind and rubbing his grubby hands on her shoulders.

"Is Lil' Susie having a bad day? Let ol' Gus help ease her tension."

"Leave me alone!"

"I know just what she needs. It's down the hall. I keep a little stash of some home brew in the broom closet. What say you and me …"

"Stop it!"

"I'll be waiting for you."

Susan was feeling the pinch alright, like she was being shoved closer and closer to the cliff's edge. But then she felt something else stirring inside her: a beast, gnawing on her mind, longing to be given a chance to drag her over that cliff. You've got to understand, Susan was the kind of gal who had always tried staying within the lines, even when the lines got blurred through too many tears of disappointment. But spending one lonely night after another in that Atlanta apartment left too much time on hand for tears alone. She'd get stupid and start beating the bushes, trying to flush the beast from hiding. She'd start by imagining herself confronted by some villain of the daytime—Gus, or Miss Kitty, for instance—who'd taunt her, put on the squeeze, and with such flippant stupidity, too. That's when the beast went to clawing, her body tensing, her eyes widening and burning with a blood lust. A scream might've even burst from her throat, if the image of the prey hadn't been withdrawn quick enough, leaving nothing but air to latch onto. Then, she'd go and cower in her bed, hating herself for having allowed the beast to bring her so near the edge.

Each day at work, she kept a pretty good leash on it, but there were times when she felt that the slightest provocation could cause her grip to weaken. The thing was growing hungrier with time and more restless for release, and all those little nightly nudges toward the edge weren't helping either, serving only as more pokes from the stick.

Then, the end of another week came, and another report was due. But this time Susan decided to bend the rules a bit. First stupid thing she'd ever done, recopying an application that had been rejected.

"Why, Miss Feathers!" Miss Kitty said through her teeth. "You are a talented young lady."

"What do you mean?" asked an already jittery Susan.

"I have never seen such creativity. I really have to wonder if somehow we've been holding you back, here at Emmanuel."

"I don't understand. I …"

"Of course, you do. And I'm sure you gave it every consideration. At least, I hope you did. But even if not, and just because I'm in a good mood today, I'll let this one slide. But no more, Miss Feathers. You ought to thank me."

"I'm really sorry. I was just trying to help her. Her work showed such talent and depth, and I …"

"Again, Miss Feathers, I didn't hire you for your mind, which has shown so little intelligence up to now."

"All I ever wanted to do was help promote art. I mean, isn't that what we're suppose to be doing here?"

The grin faded from Miss Kitty's face. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that remark. It's not very beneficial to your current situation."

"But doesn't my opinion count? I have the training. All I need is the opportunity. How can I advance, if all I do is … collect paperwork?"

"We already have plenty of experts on our staff. Believe me, your role here will certainly be … I mean, is already most suited to our needs."

"But I have so much more to offer."

"Have a nice day, Miss Feathers."

There went those pearlies and falsies again.

Susan stood, head down. "You were never really interested in my credentials, were you?"

"I said, have a nice day … didn't I?"

The grinning and batting had almost been enough to make Susan want to up-chuck right there onto Miss Kitty's desk. Well, she didn't, but she might as well have.

"Oh, and Miss Feathers, you do know where to file this, don't you?" She was handing back the widow's folder. That's when the beast went looking for lunch. First to go was the paper sorter, then the stapler, next the lamp, the ink blotter, some more folders and papers tossed aside … but not that big binder. That one went straight at Miss Kitty's frightened face.

All consciousness of her deeds had left poor Susan. She was probably screaming, as well. Think, from the time she'd begun to the moment she'd come to and found herself locked in the museum vault, Susan had ceased to be Susan. With a little poking and prodding from Miss Kitty, she'd become the beast and leaped headlong from that cliff. And only in grabbing the rope that had appeared out of nowhere did she make it across that bottomless ravine—you know, that interval between the edges when you're told not to look down but you do anyway, before landing on the far side. You still see yourself somehow suspended over that pit from which there would've been no return had you let go. Still wondering whether it would've been better if Susan had—let go of the rope, that is. But that was the only thing left to sustain her conscience, you see.

Think, there in that vault she saw stacks and stacks of a number of art works which shouldn't have been there, works too old and priceless for Emmanuel's walls and budget. You see, there had been a traveling exhibition of paintings from the Louvre collection that had come through and gone. What would some of those masterpieces still be doing there? This was the rope which carried her across the ravine all those years after.

Be that as it may, when the door to the vault she'd been locked in opened, letting in the blinding light, Susan should've high-tailed it and followed the beast back into the woods. Instead, she just stood there like the dumb helpless deer she'd been reduced to,

letting those headlights draw nearer and nearer.

"Hello, Susan," a voice from the headlights spoke. "I'm Doctor Morton. I'm here to help you."

One of the guards—might've been that pervert Gus—got behind her and held her arms.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"This will help calm you down," the good doctor said.

"I'm sorry!" she pleaded. "I won't do it again! Please!"

Then Susan felt a prick in her arm, and the beast went to sleep.

Seems she must've fallen into that pit anyway, because finding her way out took more than Susan could muster. First, a point of light appeared, then it grew, but everything it showed never seemed to stay still, like those squiggly things that get in your eyes: every time you try looking at one, it swims away. Even so, things just kept swimming away from Susan, while she herself was stuck in this pool of molasses. She tried bringing a hand to her face, but it must've weighed a ton. And the harder she tried lifting it, the more her wrist burned.

There came a click from somewhere and someone was blocking the light. Gus. He was out of uniform and all in white.

"Hey there, Lil' Susie. Here's ol' Gus."

He started stroking her hair, but then she felt his hand roaming elsewhere.

"Yeah, I'm here to help you feel better. Now, don't you go making any noises while I'm busy."

Susan heard the click again, then there was Gus climbing onto the bed. And there was his big ugly face shadowing hers. The jerk needed a bath, bad. And he kept making these noises like he was hurt or something, even panting like a worn-out dog. Next thing she knew, he was climbing off the bed. And he nearly fell, too. Susan started coughing, but Gus thought she was laughing at him—well, maybe she was and maybe she wasn't. That got him really ticked, 'cause next thing, he was cursing her and all. Then she felt her hand being jerked around, and suddenly it didn't weigh a ton anymore.

“There, funny girl. Now you can clean yourself up. Remember, no noises. I’ll be back tomorrow, and we’ll try it again.”

She heard the click one last time, but no more Gus.

Well, somehow she managed to climb out of that bed and get her arms wrapped around a toilet.

That’s how they found her—the nurses, that is. And she wouldn’t let none of them near her, even screaming at them not to touch her. The beast was wounded and in no mood for kindness. But then this nice nurse showed up and talked Susan into letting the nice nurse help her back to the bed. Another name that’s slipped from the old brain, but the gal got a pan of water and a wash cloth and got Susan to let her clean her up and put a new gown on. Susan might as well have stayed naked as put on that gown, there was nothing to it. A bed sheet would’ve done better.

The nice nurse then gave Susan a can of soda and kept talking nice things to her. Meaning really nice, none of that fake crap like Miss Kitty spewed forth.

“Ethel,” she said, “honey, can you tell me who did this to you?”

“But I’m not … my name’s not …” That’s all Susan could say, like she was out of breath and couldn’t muster up enough to tell the nice nurse that her name wasn’t Ethel.

Not long afterwards, these two cops showed up, a Black one and a White one. The nice nurse wanted them to wait, but they persisted. They got the scoop from her first, then they laid into Susan.

“We just need to ask you some questions, Miss Ethel,” said the Black one. “Can you describe the man for us?”

“I’m not … I’m not …” Then Susan said no more. She wouldn’t answer to anything they asked. That upset them a little, but they were polite about it. Then the cops left.

Next day, some men in white came and took Susan for a ride. Where to? Why, the Institute, of course. Bet ol’ Gus was disappointed about that one. No more free rides from Lil’ Susie for poor ol’ Gus.

Now, about the Institute. Outside was nice, open and green. But Susan was always reminded of where she was by the plain brick building surrounded by a high chain-linked fence. Beyond the fence she could see only a parking lot and a screen of trees and brush, all hiding the rest of the world from view—or rather, hiding Susan and the others from the rest of the world.

Back in the lounge, Susan could either curl up in a chair and count the little white specks in the ashen gray floor tile, or play "Go Fish" with some of the others. Or if she was really brave, squeeze in time at the pool table. That scared her, considering the rough clientele there, so she went fishing instead.

"Anybody got any two's?"

"Go fish, honey."

"Nope. Still nothing."

"Anybody got any jacks?"

"How much is it to you?"

"Half of my cornbread at dinner?"

"I'm telling Nurse Phoebe, y'all are gambling."

"Shut up, Toad! Gimme some of your pudding and I'll consider."

"OK. Got any jacks?"

"Nope. Go fish. Ha, ha! Thanks for the dessert, Ethel."

They were still calling Susan "Ethel." And no matter how much she fussed, there was no getting around it.

Friends were only friends as far as trading stuff was concerned. But there was one gal who became Susan's friend, whether she wanted it or not. And that was Lucy's sister. Really! The woman kept calling herself Lucy's little sister, hidden from the spotlight. And the fact that everyone was calling Susan "Ethel" meant that Ethel had to be Lucy's sister's friend. Period.

Two o'clock was pill time. Susan had no choice, and she couldn't pretend to swallow it either. They made her open to check every time.

"Anybody got any queens?"

"Desi always called Lucy the 'Queen of Comedy.' That's where

that came from."

"Got any queens, Red?"

"It's not really my natural color, nor Lucy's."

"Just go fish, Lou."

"Can I, um, ask a question?" That was Susan being wimpy as usual. "Do any of you have trouble with, you know, going to the bathroom?"

"Yeah, my pee stinks."

"It's those little pills they give us."

"Anybody know what's in those things?"

"Nope. Don't wanna know, either."

"They make me hungry, too."

"They give me weird dreams."

"You, too?" asked Susan.

"Anybody got any eights?"

"Shut up, Toad! What sort of dreams, Ethel? Erotic ones?"

"I'm telling Nurse Phoebe, y'all are talking dirty."

"Here, Toad! Two eights."

"Yippee! I win!"

"Waaaah!"

"I'm telling Nurse Phoebe, Toad's cheating."

"You better not!"

"Waaaah!"

"Ethel, slap Red for me!"

Now, the rest of the gals locked up there could only be described as either veggies or thugs. Nobody got anything out of the veggies, though. And Susan looked too normal to the thugs, so they hated her and took every chance to show just how much. Once, she got up from the lunch table to get a napkin and came back to find cigarette butts floating in her milk. And there were the occasional stuck-out feet, whenever she came out of the restroom. And after shaking enough cockroaches out of her shirt and picking enough gum from her hair, Susan learned to watch her back.

Doctor Morton came around once a week for one-on-one chit-

chats with the gals. He had sort of a watered-down Clark Gable look, you know, the oily hair and puny mustache. And everything Susan told him about the weird dreams and the trouble peeing and the headaches and the indigestion, all of it got repeated into a tape recorder by the good doctor himself. She couldn't be sure of anything. And he was always replying, "Your case is still under review, and we should know something in a few weeks." Then it got to be "in a few months." Next, she asked if she could contact her mother, but he said her mother had already been contacted and informed of her daughter "Ethel's" situation. And with that, Susan just closed her eyes, pinched her nose and said, "Aaaa …"

In the months ahead, she put on weight like never before in her life, but figured she just needed to lay off the macaroni a bit. Of course, that gave the thugs something else to pick on her about, calling her "Ethel the hippo," and shoving her out of the way just for fun, yelling, "Move it, bit butt!"

It was just before the next Christmas, and one of the nurses brought in a croquet set. Word was, she'd bought it for her little boy, but the boy's dad had skipped state with him, making the nurse so mad that, at next morning's row-call, she tossed it on the floor and said, "Y'all can have it!" No one knew how to play, except for Susan who'd seen something in a TV commercial once. So, the thugs made her set up the little goals. Then, Lou decided to desert Susan and friends and join the thugs. Lou never did like losing.

Naturally, the thugs started winning, especially after they'd either knocked or tossed most of their pitiful opponent's balls over the fence. Even Lucy's sister started bawling after hers got chunked. So, it was down to Susan against the four thugs. Lou, who by the way was this Black gal with a gold tooth, knocked her ball near Susan's and started marching over there, grinning like a prospector. Susan decided to get stupid and stand over hers with mallet raised.

"Hey, girls!" Lou yelled. "Look at honky hippo Ethel guarding her egg. So, what ya gonna do, gal?"

"I don't want to fight you, Lou," Susan said. "Let's just play the

game fair."

"Then step aside and let me give your egg its wings."

"No!"

This new behavior of hers could've been just another side effect from those little pills, making Susan act so freaky and dumb, but it certainly didn't slow her down, 'cause when she saw Lou's mallet headed for her head, she ducked and swung hers at Lou, hitting her in the shin. Down went Lou, screaming. Then the nurses came running, two helping Lou up while the third herded the rest inside. That's when Susan went down, too, like someone had punched her in the gut, which they hadn't, but it was one hullabaloo belly ache, I can tell you. Nurse Phoebe tried phoning Doctor Morton but got no answer. So, she shoved Susan into the backseat of her car and took off.

Susan could hear Lucy's sister yelling, "Don't worry, Ethel! I'll call Fred!"

The car pulled around to the back of a big building in town, and Nurse Phoebe laid her next to a door and drove off.

Poor Susan could feel her undies already soaked and something else coming close behind the tidal wave, beating a path to get out through her you-know-what. She couldn't do nothing but sit there, moaning and groaning and banging her fist against the glass door.

She heard keys jingling, and there was this big Black security guard standing over her and yelling with a hoarse voice, "Oh, merciful Jesus! Oh, merciful Jesus!"

All that exertion must've been what she needed to flush those pills from her system, 'cause when that little cloud got lifted from Susan's mind, all she wanted to do then was bang her head against that door. There was something trying to bust out of her alright, and it wasn't last night's supper, either.

Now, Ruby. Don't you think that, for a gal with two college degrees, Susan should've been bright enough to have figured out something already? Think, it was so … well, anyway, later there was that shiny thing left from all that crap coating its body. But in

Susan's eyes, that little thing was the prettiest jewel she'd ever laid eyes on, a precious gem to behold, and it was all hers. Susan asked to hold it, but the nurses had gotten really quiet.

One nurse yelled, "ICU! Quick!" and another grabbed it and ran from the room.

Susan saw that nice nurse from before coming in. "Just rest now, Ethel. The doctor will be in later to explain everything."

"What everything? Where'd they take it? Why can't I see …"

"Hush, now. Don't worry. We're keeping an eye on her. You shouldn't worry."

It kept Susan worrying anyway and wondering till sometime after dark. So, she slid off the bed, nearly falling down. She had a grip on the railing in the hall, limping her way.

"Ma'am," said a nurse, "You shouldn't be out of bed."

"But I want to see," Susan whined.

"Maybe in the morning."

"No! I want to see now! Why won't you let me see?"

That one then talked to the nice nurse who told her to get a wheelchair for Susan. The nice nurse then took Susan down this dimly lit back hallway and stopped the chair near a big door.

Kneeling beside her, the nice nurse said to Susan, "Ethel, honey, you've got to be strong now. You've got to be tough."

"But my name's not Ethel. It's Susan. Where is it?"

"OK, I'll call you Susan, then. We're going in to see her now."

She rolled the chair into this room full of machines flashing and blinking and beeping and humming, and there was this glass box with wires and tubes coming out of it, and inside the box lay that reddish-brown little thing that had popped out of her. It had to have been the only good thing that had ever happened to her, the one thing that could've made up for the miserable life she'd been living for the past year. But having that glass to prevent her was probably for the best, because in Susan's mind, even to touch the little thing inside could've made it crumble before her eyes. She just sank back into the chair and resigned herself to the inevitable,

leaving her precious one to lie there, shivering and shriveling away. Her pretty little jewel. The treasure of her very soul. Her Ruby.

11:41 PM THU

Well, must've had that one coming. Haven't shed tears like that since Vent. Even got the cigarette wet. And boy, needed another one, bad!

At this point, your old mom could probably say something stupid like, "Need I say more?"

Well, here's the *more* part for you. Susan ran.

Always running. Say, "Boo!" and she runs. Say, "We're doing all we can," and she high-tails it. Say, "You shouldn't give up hope," and she's already looking for the exit. And she found it, too. It didn't take her long, after they'd wheeled her back to her room, to go looking for something to cover her naked butt, then to find the fire exit and hit the street. But before heading off into the darkness, she looked up at the sign that read, "Saint Elizabeth's Hospital." Yeah, Elizabeth, the Lord's aunt, the one his mom had gone to see after receiving her little jewel from the Big Guy himself. But Mary never ran, even after they'd stuck nails in his hands, she stayed right there. But not Susan. Oh, no!

Man! It's harder getting out of this swimming pool than out of a dumpster. That's life. Easier going in than coming out. That's what Susan learned alright. There's just no easy exit, is there? Now, all this old gal's got to do is keep from falling back in. Night, Ruby. Sweet dreams, my little jewel. Hug Vent for me, will you, honey?

11

Chris

When we entered the downtown Hilton, Sweedee slapped that Gold Card onto the counter, demanding the best room in the house.

The clerk just looked at both of us with open jaw and said, “Uh, sorry, sir, but it’s company policy not to let out rooms for that kind of, uh … business. Sorry. I can recommend a nice motel over on Third Street.”

There went yours-truly trying to explain things to the dude, as well as the security guard, while holding Sweedee back from climbing over the counter, when one of Daddy’s old buddies popped out of the elevator, recognized me from when I’d asked him for a recommendation to BR Technical, and offered us the time left on his suite. I also recollect meeting him at a few dinner parties, a hefty oil exec from Lafayette.

But I can assure you, that was definitely not Missus Oil Exec tugging on his arm and saying, “Come on, sugar! baby’s hungry!”

After he’d patted me on the back, gave a wink and headed out, I turned to the clerk who was now shoving the key and ledger across the desk with an apologetic giggle.

It didn’t help matters either, when Sweedee grabbed the key and said, “Come on, North! Let’s get this over with.”

We had to skip lunch, of course, since Sweedee wanted to crash

in the bedroom for the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon, leaving me to take the car, pick up a burger, then cruise the old neighborhood near Sherwood. It hadn't changed, I can tell you that. So I headed back to the Hilton and channel surfed until about three, when I remembered to phone up Lynn and fill her in on what had happened. I told her to forget about getting the money from Vent Junior, that I would just take it from my inheritance. About then, Sweedee was dragging herself into the kitchenette and getting the coffee pot gurgling. I felt a little leery about taking her out in public, you know, what with the way she looked and smelled and all. She agreed with me for once, thankfully. So we ordered room service, then she sent out her clothes for cleaning, found another bathrobe and camped out in the bedroom for the rest of the evening, flipping channels. Oh, and she ordered herself a few dozen doughnuts, as well.

I stayed up till almost midnight, racking my brains again over those lyrics I'd composed in the tub. But the most I could squeeze out was this:

Sitting in a hotel room with nothing to do.
Can't seem to get my weary mind off of you.
There's two kinds of hurting that a man can't seem to shake:
One that haunts his dreams at night, and the other that keeps him awake.

By 11:30, it was clear that tune was destined for the waste basket. I then gave my six-string a rest and went out onto the balcony. With elbows propped on the railing, I watched downtown smolder under the street lamps, and spotted the Mississippi in the distance, shimmering away under a nearly-full moon, with a few boats and barges slipping in and out of the reflection.

That moon! It just kept floating away westward, as big and cold and bright as you please. Having already crossed the river, the old

dude must've been approaching his home, just another place to land, like I'd been seeking for the previous six years. Well, there it went anyway, that big, cold, bright skyliner, sailing onward. The scene started reminding me of that tub back there near another river: big, cold and bright, and never really able to take me anywhere either, except in my imagination. Still, somewhere there had to be a place the moon and I could lay anchor. Had to be.

"Somewhere over yonder," I spoke to him. "Perhaps just one more mile to go, old shiny dude. But where to?"

Somewhere over yonder
Just one more mile to go.

If Sweedee hadn't been hogging the jacuzzi so late, I could've taken those phrases a lot further. Instead, I just jotted them on a hotel courtesy card and shove it in my pants pocket.

Sinking like the moon into that big leather sofa in the suite—man, was that thing comfortable—I began surveying the agenda for the next day. But my brain must've had other ideas, like shutting down the town and leading me through one dark alley after another, and always with that old man in the moon looking over my shoulder, too. That's when I found myself dropped off in the driveway at the house on Sherwood, facing the goal over the garage and with a basketball squeezed between my fingertips. So, I decided to play the old kid's game of dribbling the ball a few times, kissing it for luck and launching it towards the hoop. Perfect shot!

"Ingots!" I shouted.

There was this invisible crowd roaring all around me. Another few dribbles, a kiss to the rubber and away it went again. Rebound!

"Aw, Lakers!"

But I wasn't deterred. I got the ball back, did the dribble and the kiss, but as I was about to shoot, the garage door lifted and out came that little girl from previous dreams, walking my ten-speed onto the drive.

“Chris, take me home!”

I just knew I’d seen her somewhere, long ago, but I wanted to finish my game before anything had the chance to wake me.

“Just let me sink this shot,” I told her. “One more point, and the Ingots have the championship.”

“But I want to go home!”

“Just one more shot. OK?”

Things started growing dim, with nothing left but that moon spotlighting the concrete. The roar of the fans grew louder, and there were flashes from all sides, like a hundred cameras clicking away. I realized then that I’d been transported to the throw line of a real live professional court, and there behind the goal line stood Mason in his jersey and sneakers, holding the ball.

“Hey, Chris!” he shouted. “Here ya go, buddy. Go for it!”

After he’d tossed me the b-ball, I did my dribble and kiss, but the glare from the camera flashes kept concealing the goal. That’s when I spotted Sweedee standing under the basket, with wet and ragged hair and nothing on but a bathrobe.

“Come on, North!” she said. “Let’s do it!”

Next thing I knew, she had that robe whipped open. Woe, Nelly! Let’s just say that my eyes were spared the agony of the sight by my waking up from that nightmare.

“Hey, kid! Come on! Let’s do this! OK?”

Sweedee was now standing over me for real, in her usual blue robe and pajamas and toting a half-eaten doughnut and half-finished cigarette—filterless, of course. I probably could’ve used some of that filterless coffee of hers right about then. Outside, the rain was a curtain of water screening the balcony. A sudden crack of thunder and flash of lightning nearly knocked me off the sofa.

“See?” she said, gesturing with the cigarette. “Told ya.”

Man! Rain! I hated driving in the rain.

I TRIED PARKING the car as near the front entrance of North Brothers as I could, but I still got half-soaked before getting through the door.

Sweedee, on the other hand, had that umbrella, and not a single speck of moisture showed up on either her or that bundle she kept hugging. “So, where’s the party?” she said.

The lobby was deserted. No Darla, either. We went back to Vent Junior’s office and found my brother poring over paper work spread across his desk.

“Chris!” he said, giving me a look. “Where’ve you been, man? It’s nearly nine o’clock.”

“I overslept. What’s the rush?”

Sweedee had already sunk into the leather chair and was poking the carpet with that umbrella.

“Well, it’s a long ways to Atlanta, buddy,” said Vent Junior. “Considering the weather, too. And I told that lady in charge over there you’d be showing up tomorrow morning. She even put in a good word for Miss Feathers here, saying how she was their best representative, even ‘highly endorsed her expertise’ and all.”

I looked over at Sweedee. The lighter was paused within inches of the cigarette. Her eyes were glazed over, as well. Slipping the cigarette from her mouth, she said, “Well, naturally.” After she’d finished lighting up, Miss Contented cocked one corner of her lips and said, “By the way, Junior, getting enough sleep lately?” There went a heavy cloud of smoke streaming over his desk.

My brother’s smile took a sour turn, as he looked to me for some sort of clue.

I said, “I for one think that’s great, them recommending Miss Feathers and all. ‘Cause I’ve decided to hire her myself, to go with me.”

“You hired her?” he said. “With what?”

“My share of the estate.” I dropped into the chair next to Sweedee’s.

“But, Chris, you know that’s not settled yet.” He was chuckling

now and grinning.

"Listen, Vent. This is no longer about what you want. OK? This is about what Daddy would've wanted."

"And what makes you think you know what his will in the matter would be? Notice I said, *will*, Chris."

"Will, my ass! You started this, Vent."

There was a shrill whistle from Sweedee's lips, then, "Hey! Let's just dump the family squabbles for a bit, shall we? So, what do you say, Junior?" She was pointing the umbrella at him now.

He hesitated for a few seconds, then said, "Well, I say, Miss Feathers has a point. Sure, Chris. Do whatever you want. As for me, I've got to get back to this payroll mess. So, if you two would just wait in the lobby until the Duck gets ready."

"Then that's what we'll do," I said, getting up.

Before Sweedee had gotten to her feet though, Vent Junior tried offering to trade umbrellas with her. Whatever that was about. She just looked at the one from the camp and said, "Nothing wrong with this one." Then she shouldered it and sashayed from the office.

Out in the lobby, Sweedee was facing the front windows, tapping the umbrella's tip on the carpet and staring at the rain.

"I think I'll go see how things are going," I said.

"What?" Her face turned, and there was this tired, expressionless look on it. "Oh, sure, North. You go on. Old Sweedee and Luke's Mary'll just hang out here. Call when you're ready to boogie." She then walked closer to the window and just stood there, staring at the rain.

For your information, the family's motor home was a 1989 Dalton Mallard, aka "the Duck." Just a 33-foot class A, painted an off-white with the streamlined figure of a Mallard set within the green and gold striping midriff. It had sat out near the highway all those years like a wall-flower. But now, it would be getting its feet wet and learning an overdue lesson from none other than Christopher "Roadmaster" North about what freedom of the open road was all about—that is, if the engine didn't stall in the middle

of Airline.

Mason was coming out of the door from the employee lounge. “Chris!”

I waved back. “Hey, dude! You the only guy working here today?”

“Naw, man. The others are still on break. So, you set for your vacation?”

“Vacation? I wish. No, actually I’m running a little errand over to Atlanta, taking some of Daddy’s art work to a museum.”

“No kidding. I never knew Mister Vent to be some sort of Picasso. So, can I take a peak?”

“Sure. They’re probably already inside the Duck. Come on.”

Just then, to my surprise, Darla came strutting around the front end, wiping her hands with a paper towel. After spotting us, she stopped dead cold. A slight smudge was stuck to her chin.

“Hey, Darla,” I laughed. “Don’t tell me Vent Junior’s got you working with the boys in the shop now.”

“Not if I can help it,” she said, shivering a little and starting to giggle. “I was just, you know, using the restroom back there. The one in the office had a stopped-up toilet.”

“What’s wrong with the one in the lounge?” asked Mason.

“Oh, I guess I forgot about that. In a hurry, you know. Well, better get back before Vent starts hunting for me.” Then, after opening the lobby door, she turned and said, “And you better hurry yourself, Chris. They’ll be expecting you pretty soon.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So I’ve heard.”

Then, she wiggled her fingers at me, winking and grinning in that cute, sexy way of hers, with only that smudge on her pretty chin to mar the picture.

“Man, I think she likes you,” said Mason.

“Get outta here!”

“Aw, man! You know you want her.”

“Yeah, me and every other loser between here and New Orleans. Besides, I think she’s seeing someone already.”

“Oh, yeah? Who?”

“Just forget about it and come on.”

Now, if you’d figured the changes to the shop weren’t enough, they’d gone and furnished and carpeted the inside of the Duck, even redone the closet to hold a 25-inch stereo TV. The interior did sport a kind of musty odor when I first opened the door—the pivoting door itself creaking like a frog in a pond—but seeing how the Duck had been remodeled was starting to make my trailer back in Birmingham look like a cattle stall. I mean, it already did, but at this point it wouldn’t have taken much hay and cow patties to make up my mind at last about chunking it.

“And just think,” said Mason, “all we gotta do is line up a couple of chicks in each town and never worry about the party losing its steam. Know what I mean?”

“Wait a minute. Didn’t you and Sandra ever …?”

“Aw, man! Did you have to go and remind me? Mercy!”

While I was about to go looking around, Mason reached in and found the remote.

“Hold on,” he said. “Let me show you the best part.” He switched on the TV and pressed a button on a box overhead. There was an electric hum coming from the roof and after a few seconds the picture cleared, though with some interference from the rain outside. It was showing a rotating diamond ring on one of those shopping channels.

“That can’t be local,” I said.

“No, man. It’s off the satellite.”

“Satellite? Wow! But where …?”

“On the roof. There’s a dish built into a little dome up there.”

“Alright! Now I can keep up with the Ingots.”

“You still follow those losers?”

“Hey, they’re only five games away from a possible play-off berth.”

“But the last three are road games, buddy, and two of those against former NBA finalists.”

“You just wait till they come strutting onto that court in Saint Louis to play the Lakers.”

“Man, you’re dreaming. But hey! Got one more gadget to show you. Come see.”

We went upfront, and Mason pressed a button on a box attached to the dash. It had a screen which then lit up, displaying a grid of some kind.

“GPS, man!” he said. “It uses the dish up top to show where you’re at and where you’re headed. Just tell it where you want to go, and it shows you the best route. Just play with it some while you’re on the road.”

“All this fancy tech,” I said. “It’s gonna take some getting used to.”

“Mister Vent spared nothing in fixing this baby up. And it’s in your hands, brother. Just don’t get spoiled, OK?”

“Thanks, man.”

We were stepping off the Duck—with me thinking that creaking noise in the door just needed a little machine oil—and saw some of the shop guys coming off break. Mason asked one of them if they were done with the Duck.

Steve, the shop foreman, gave him a puzzled look. “We finished up that job an hour ago. I thought I told Pete to close the hood. Hey, Pete!”

“Don’t look at me,” said a young muscular dude.

“Well, I’m looking anyway,” said Steve. “So, go close it again.”

Mason patted my back. “Hey, man, I’ve gotta go get the detailer ready. Why not chill out till the rain lets up.”

I was trying to get a better look at the dish-dome on top, when Sweedee entered the shop, followed by Lynn wearing a really nice dark green pants-suit and carrying a casserole dish. She’d told me how she’d been trying to start up a small catering business, you know, something to give her more of a sense of purpose than having to stand beside my brother and smile all the time.

“Hey, Lynn!” I said. “You’ve gotta check this out.”

“Oh, Chris,” she responded, trotting over. “I’m so glad you haven’t left yet. Can we talk somewhere?”

“Well, the new Duck’s as good a place as any.”

Inside the motor home, Lynn put the casserole in the fridge.

“It’s chicken and rice with vegetables,” she said. “Should be plenty enough to keep you from having to stop somewhere.”

“Smells wonderful.”

I grabbed a soda and tried pointing out the amenities of the place, but Lynn’s pretended interest became obvious, as she slid into the dinette booth and motioned me toward the seat opposite.

“I thought I’d better tell you now,” she said. “Mister Joe told Vent he’d went back up to the camp yesterday afternoon, to fetch something he’d left, and found the front door to the house left open. Well, he called the sheriff, and around six the sheriff called Vent to come out there. Chris, the place was a mess, with things scattered everywhere. Vent said nothing looked missing, although he couldn’t be sure.”

I shook my head and said, “They must’ve come right after me and Sweedee left. Well, I can’t go up 37 anymore, like I’d planned.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I guess I’ll have to take 61 to Vicksburg and get on I-20 from there. It’ll show us down a bit, but I’d rather that than meet up with those Syndicate dudes along the way.”

“Well, give me a call every so often to let me know that you’re safe.”

“Listen,” I told Lynn, taking her hand. “If any of those dudes show up, just call the police. I don’t want you dealing with them anymore. No telling what they might pull next.”

“You just be careful,” she replied, “and keep calling me till you reach Atlanta.”

“I will.” I started to let go, but then added, “Something else, Lynn. I don’t know how to say this, so I’ll just say it.”

How do you tell someone like Lynn something like that? OK, I’ll admit it. I had a slight crush on her. Alright? And telling her what I

suspected about Vent Junior could've broken her heart, but at least it would've set her free from the two-timer. Or worse: what if she already knew and maybe was going to leave him anyway? And there I was, holding her hand and waiting for the right words to come out.

"What is it, Chris?"

"It's just that … well, I need you to … uh, look after my car while I'm gone."

"Well, sure, Chris. I'd be happy to."

Time for the chickens to start cackling! OK, so I was a dirty coward for not telling her. Well, maybe I just needed some more time, perhaps a message left on her machine, or a note slipped into her purse.

We were back in the shop, and I was looking for Sweedee so as to get things rolling. She was standing back of the Duck, studying it's tail-feathers, so to speak.

"There you are, North," she said. "Hold this." She shoved the bundle into my hands and walked over to where Mason stood.

"Do you mind, pal?" she said to him, taking up the air-brush's nozzle and hose. "Got anything in a medium blue? Nothing too glossy."

"Let me look," said Mason, punching away at the keyboard. The unit had a monitor attached, and the screen soon displayed a palette of blues. "Pick your flavor."

"That one," she said, pointing to a color patch.

After a few more keystrokes, he said, "There. You're loaded and ready for game."

Sweedee then took the nozzle, wrapping the hose over her shoulders, and positioned herself behind the Duck. She pulled the trigger, and a bright stream of blue struck the panel, leaving strokes of big cursive lettering under the back window.

"'*Sweedee on board*'?" I read—said, rather.

"Yeah," she answered, standing back to admire her work. "It'll let some of my good buddies know where this old gal's staying.

Thanks, pal." She handed the nozzle and hose back to Mason.

Next, Vent Junior was coming through the door and hollering about the crew holding us up or something.

"It's been ready for a while, Vent," said Steve.

"Well, let's get them on the road then," said my brother.

Sweedee snatched the bundle from me and was already inside the doorway, but I wanted to take a moment to hug Lynn, then catch another look at the Duck.

Sweedee poked her head out and hollered, "What? You gotta pee first?"

"You heard the lady, Chris," said Vent Junior. "She's your personal adviser now."

"I just thought we might christen it or something," I said.

"Here," said Sweedee, stepping off, grabbing the soda can from me and splashing some on the front fender. "Now, let's book it."

"I'll take that," said Vent Junior, lifting the can by the rim from Sweedee's hand. "There's plenty more in the fridge, Chris. You two help yourselves."

With all that being said and done, I went around and climbed into the driver's seat. The keys were already in the ignition. It took a few tries, but I got her rumbling. The stick on the column was automatic, which suited me just perfect. I took extra care backing her out of the garage, letting the rain's drumming on the roof tell me when I'd cleared the doorway. Seeing the water coating the windshield, I braked and hunted for the wiper switch. After getting the two of them slashing away, I then tried the wheel, which turned really smooth, too, almost like a car's. I couldn't tell much by the mirrors, they'd already gotten covered quick with droplets. But I knew I had plenty of clearance, so I let that worry pass. The next problem would be getting the Duck onto Airline. Luckily, traffic was next to nil. I felt like I'd gotten the hang of things after straightening her up in the right lane and still keeping the front bumper behind the cross-stripe on the pavement at the light.

"Just shout when it's lunch time," said Sweedee. "At the couch,

that is."

The rain hadn't let up at all, and I couldn't see more than fifty feet ahead. But at least the hugeness of the windshield opened up the view all around. The light turned green, and away we went. It felt like the Duck was floating across the intersection, that's how smooth of a ride it had.

"OK," said Sweedee, lounging on the sofa behind me. "Let's see what I missed here." Voices started booming from the TV. "Aah!" she growled. "You mean they still haven't suckered someone into buying that crappy ring?"

12

Hanna

"Hanna, are you done in there? Hanna?"

Yes, Mama.

"Well, come on and get ready for bed."

Do I have to?

"Hanna? Remember what I told you?"

OK.

Babe, I'm beginning to think this private eye work isn't so great after all. Mama still treats me like we're back at home. "Take a good bath, Hanna. Don't forget to clean between your toes, Hanna, so you don't get fungus. Use the shower curtain, Hanna, so you don't get water on the floor where someone can slip. Hang up the towel, Hanna, so it can dry and not mildew." I kept hoping Mister Jordan would debbitize me and make me a rookie like Mama, so she couldn't boss me around so much. But after we got to the motel, all he did was go back out and pick up supper for us then sit in the car and talk on the phone with Missus Jordan. That left Mama still in charge.

I don't know why she's making us go to bed, Babe, we got plenty of sleep on the plane. Wish we could stay up and help out on the case. I know I wouldn't be able to read some of the words on Mama's pooter, but if they're spelled out for me, I can get some of

what they're saying. Well, sometimes. Like the word on this machine in the bathroom. It spells C-O-N-D-O-M. Now, if I drop the O's, which are just filler anyway, it says, "See in dee mmm," which must mean, "Look in the machine." There's this slot at the bottom, but no matter how far I put my fingers, I can't see anything up in there. And it's way too small for you to look, Babe. Guess someone would need really long fingers, and they'd probably find nothing but panties, like that man in the picture is wearing. A man wearing panties. Now, that's just too silly, don't you think, Babe? Besides, I've already got panties, and Mama let me wear a t-shirt from her overnight bag. So we don't need to C-O-N-D-O-M anyway. Only silly men who wear panties.

"Did you hang up the towel?"

Yes, Mama.

"How about the curtain? Did you use the curtain?"

Yes, Mama.

"Now, I don't want to go in there and find water all over the floor. We can't afford for someone to get hurt. The company won't pay for injuries that are preventable."

I used the curtain.

Let's sit on the bed and see what's on Mama's pooter. Look at that, Babe! She's got it fixed to where all she has to do is rub that spot in front with her finger and the little bug on the screen flies wherever she wants it. And when it lands, she just presses a button and the bug explodes, making another picture come out of nowhere. This is ten times more fun than TV, and without commercials.

Can I stay up and watch you work?

"It's late, honey, and …"

Why did she change her name?

"Who?"

Sweedee. Mister Jordan said she used to be called Susan.

"I don't know. Maybe to hide her identity, I guess."

Is there a picture of her?

"No, just a description, and that's too old to tell us anything. In the morning, we'll ask the people who saw her."

Sorry, Babe. No more pictures. Just boring words left.

You think we'll see her there?

"Well, she's probably already left town."

But maybe she's still around, hiding, waiting to see if someone's after her.

"Silly! Why would she do that?"

Maybe so she'll know how to disguise herself and keep from being chased.

Mama must think I'm being funny, laughing so. "Yeah, right. Blend in with the crowd. I'm not so sure she's that smart."

But what if …?

There's Mister Jordan. Mama's stopped laughing. "Were you able to reach Mama?" She means Grandma Carol.

"Yep. She said she'd just gone to tuck in Hanna and nearly had a heart attack in the process. Young lady, that wasn't a very nice thing to do to your grandmother."

I'm sorry.

I'm just glad Mister Jordan was able to keep Grandma's heart from being attacked. Mama would've spanked me for sure, then.

"Now, when I call Grandma in the morning, you have to apologize to her yourself. Understood?"

I will, Mama. I'm sorry. Babe's sorry, too.

I guess work's over for Mister Jordan, because he just took off his coat and tie and started eating his hamburger. "So, have you got the facts down?"

"Yeah, most," Mama's saying. "But one thing still puzzles me. Why would she have hung onto the stolen art for this long? If I was her, I'd have sold them a long time ago and retired to the Caribbean."

"You'd have a hard time finding a buyer. Convincing someone to pay big money for stolen art is like trying to sell ocean front property in Tennessee."

“But could people in Louisiana be that dumb?”

“Been watching the news lately.”

“Yeah, and apparently Miss Feathers has, too. But, to wait this long to come out of hiding.”

Here’s our chance to help out, Babe.

Mama, what if she’s tired of hiding?

“The child’s got a point.” Good, I got Mister Jordan on my side. “It’s been over 20 years. She’s probably broke, with nowhere else to go. All she needed was for somebody to come along and give her a break.”

“I don’t know, Clese. You make her sound like she wants to be found.”

I wonder if Sweedee has any family. You think she misses her kids?

Mister Jordan was about to take another bite, but the last one must’ve got caught in his windpipe. He sure is coughing something terrible. “Is the AC on? It feels kind of hot in here.”

“Feels fine to me, Clese. You OK?”

I hope he’s OK, too. The last time I felt hot, I got really woozy and had to lie down. I was sick for days. Mama said it was from something bad I’d eaten. I hope Mister Jordan’s hamburger didn’t go bad.

“Yeah, I’m fine. What were you saying, Allie?”

“Not me. Hanna was speaking.”

“Hanna, why don’t you see what’s on TV, while me and your mama talk.”

But I want to find out if Sweedee had any kids.

Mama’s starting to side with Mister Jordan again. “Honey, they’ve got cable. Maybe even the Cartoon Channel. Just keep it down, while Mama and Mister Jordan are talking.”

Babe, why is it when grown-up talk is starting to get int’risting, they make me go watch stupid cartoons? The best that I can figure is that they’re afraid I might figure things out before they do. So, I guess we have to be nice and not make them look dumb. Grown-ups do it to each other all the time and get away with it, but when a kid

does it, they get really mad. It's like that story about the Umpire's new clothes, or the one Jesus told about the Frickasees, how they made everyone else eat flies while they ate up a whole camel like it was nothing. Missus Stone my bible teacher said it meant they were too uppity to follow their own rules, but when Jesus said something about it, they got real sore and hated him for it. I don't like making Mama mad, even when I ask why she's copying a movie if it says she could go to jail for that. She tries following the rules all the time, and feels real bad when someone catches her breaking one, or "bending" it a little, as she puts it. And she used to be a police officer, that is, until she got scared she'd be hurt and I'd be left alone with no one to look after me.

So, now we'll just look at TV, I guess.

"Just one more home game to go in the regular season for the Ingots."

Grown-ups bouncing a ball around. That's silly.

"Ladies, you don't want to miss out on these beautiful diamond-style rings."

Pretty, but I don't have any money.

"We're still tracking this powerful front as it heads eastward. Look out Southeast Louisiana, Mississippi and you folks in Memphis."

There's that rainbow again, but it doesn't look as pretty now.

"They've tried everything they can think of to free those whales."

Look at the big fishes, Babe! I wouldn't want to catch one of them, it might eat me, instead.

"It's the logical thing to do, Captain."

Grown-ups walking around in their pajamas. Now, that's too silly.

Well, Babe, there's nothing on TV, not even cartoons. But here's a commercial with a man talking about painting cars. I wonder how they do that.

"So, why not bring in that old car or truck of yours and let us

make it look brand new again. Just stop by North Brothers, and we'll add value to your biggest investment. That's North Brothers Paint and Auto at the corner of Airline and Peelwood."

Mama, there's a man called North on TV.

"That's nice, honey."

But he might be who y'all were going to see.

"I doubt it, sweetheart."

But Mister Jordan said he had a car place.

I got Mister Jordan's attention, at least. "Where did you see this, baby?"

On TV. It's called, "North Brothers Paint and All That," and it's on the corner of Airplane and something.

"Well, that can't be it."

Mama's starting to get int'risted. "Are you sure? How many North car places could there be in Baton Rouge?"

"Allie, they said North Auto Repair, not North Brothers."

"Well, did you check the phone book?"

I'll get it, Mama.

Wow, Babe! This thing's really big and heavy. I have to put you down to lift it onto the bed.

"Here, honey. Let Mama have that."

"Allie, there's probably a dozen places named North in there."

"Let's see. N's, North … Here it is. There's just two: North Brothers and North Oaks. That has to be it."

"But why would they tell us different?"

"Maybe they got it wrong."

I've got it, Babe!

Mama, what if Sweedee lied, so we wouldn't know the real name?

"Honey, it wasn't Sweedee who called the museum. Clese, you must've heard it wrong."

"It was North Auto Repair on Florida Boulevard, not airplane and something. That's what Miss Gillespie said they told her."

Let's try another, Babe.

What if Sweedee knocked out Miss Geely's-pee like before and

pretended to be her?

"Hanna, please! We've got to deal with facts here, not fairy tales. Clese, let's check it out anyway. It's not far, just a little ways back toward the airport, according to this map."

"Fine, fine. Whatever. And if it'll make you happy, we can take the grand tour of the whole Delta region afterwards."

"Yeah, yeah. And we can all stop along the way and pick cotton, too. Look away, Clese! look away!"

Hear that, Babe? We get to pick cotton.

And I'll keep a look-away out for Sweedee.

"No, little lady. You'll keep a lookie-here and stay put. You're along unofficially. Remember?"

Un-awe-fully. That must be the rank below rookie. We better be good, Babe, so we can get pree-moded like Mama did.

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WOW, Babe! Heaven must've gotten real dirty last night, for the angels to have to use so much water. Probably brought it all the way from the ocean. I can't even see if Sweedee's still here or not. But if she's as smart as Mama says, she wouldn't be out in this anyway. Unless she needed a good bath herself, and then she'd have to use the curtain for sure.

She might've ducked into that building Mister Jordan is pulling up to. It's a pretty building, looks more like a shopping mall than a car place. Maybe only rich people bring their cars here. Must be some fancy paint job, don't you think, Babe? Keep your eyes open now, after we get inside.

Just a few people standing around in here, but they're just men and don't look too rich to me. Here comes a woman. Is that her? She looks too pretty to be a crazy person.

Let's let Mister Jordan check for us. "Excuse me, ma'am. My name's Clese Jordan. I'm a private investigator, and this is my partner, Allie Babbitt. We were suppose to meet a Mister Vent

North here."

"I'm Mister North's secretary," the lady is saying. "Could you tell me what this is about?"

"We work for an insurance company in Atlanta and were told that Mister North made a call to the Emmanuel Museum regarding some paintings he'd purchased. Savannah Mutual insures art work for the museum and wants the paintings returned for examination."

"Why, that makes no sense. Vent didn't … I mean, Mister North never said anything about buying any paintings. Nothing to me, that is. Not even while we were … Um, who did you say you were with?"

Boy, Babe! She may be pretty, but she acts so dumb.

Tell her, Mister Jordan. "Savannah Mutual. The director of the museum, Miss Gillespie, said that she received a call from Mister North yesterday."

"Oh! Yes, the museum. Now I remember. I put the call through myself. But there was nothing about buying any paintings."

Mister Jordan looks troubled. Maybe we came to the wrong place after all. Maybe Sweedee's still at that other place. I hope Mister Jordan's not too mad at us for bringing him here by mistake.

Here comes a man wearing red straps to hold up his pants. He's kind of late to be dressing up as Santa. Just hope he's not one of those men that wears panties.

"Morning. I'm Vent North. What can I do for you?"

"Vent," the pretty lady's saying, "these people are asking about some paintings, but I told them that …"

"I'm Clese Jordan. We were told that you contacted the Emmanuel Museum in Atlanta regarding several paintings you'd just purchased."

The man is shaking Mister Jordan's hand. "I called those people about showing some pictures my daddy had done. But I'm afraid you've wasted your time coming all this way, I've already sent my brother to take them over there this morning."

"No, sir, you don't understand. You see, we were sent to retrieve

some art work belonging to the museum. But I guess there's been some sort of mix-up. Sorry to have bothered you folks."

"Well, if you still need something to investigate, I might have just the thing. Would you step into my office? Darla, honey, hold all my calls."

I know Mama made us stay out here, but I can't wait to see if Sweedee's hiding back there. And that pretty woman keeps bugging me about what flavor soda I like. But I better not. I don't want to have to go potty and miss something. She just keeps acting kind of weird and nice to me, but I can tell it's just pretend. Something about us is making her nervous for sure. And there she goes to talk on her phone, like Mama does when she doesn't want me to hear. Now's our chance, Babe.

Mama and Mister Jordan are sitting in there talking to that man, Mister North. We'll hide behind this plant and listen. Boy, this guy doesn't keep his office very clean, this plant has dust all over it, and spider webs, too. Yuck! We better watch out for those. Look, Babe! There's another woman. That's got to be Sweedee. Don't let her see us. Oh, no! We're caught! She's coming over. What'll we do?

"Why, hey there, sweetheart. Who are you?"

And she's pretending to be nice, too, like that witch in Hansel and Gretel. If she offers us any food, Babe, don't eat it.

"Hanna!" Mama sees us now. Quick, let's run to her before Sweedee can grab us. "Hanna, I thought I told you to wait out front."

Mama, don't let Sweedee hurt us.

Why is Mister Jordan laughing? "Young lady! That's Missus North. I apologize for the child. We've been discussing the case around her, and she's picked up on things and made them into fantasies."

Guess we were wrong again, Babe. Hope this doesn't hurt our chances of becoming rookies. That lady doesn't look so dangerous now. I guess we can trust her.

"I have a little boy of my own." That's Mister North talking.

“Kids can say some of the darnedest things, can’t they?”

Why do grown-ups keep saying that about us kids? I don’t even know what a darn-this thing is, so how could I have said one. It must be a code word just between grown-ups, to let each other know when they’re dealing with a smart kid.

Mama’s trying to get rid of us again. “Honey, why don’t you go wait out there. We won’t be much longer.”

And here comes that nice lady again. “I bet she’d like a brownie. What do you say? I put some by the coffee maker. Would you like one, sweetheart?”

No, ma’am. I’m not hungry.

Sorry, Babe, but we’ve got to pretend we’re not hungry while we’re helping Mama and Mister Jordan. It’s part of the training to be a rookie, to go without food and just live on coffee. But don’t worry. Mama won’t let us drink any of that.

“And that brings me to why I brought you in here.” Mister North must not be thirsty, either, he seems more interested in talking about that can of soda on his desk than drinking it. “I just happen to have a sample of Miss Feathers’ fingerprints on this can.”

Mister Jordan keeps smiling about something. “I appreciate your efforts, but that really won’t help us. You see, it looks like we were just sent on a wild goose chase by some prankster. If you’ll excuse me, I have to phone my boss.”

See, Babe. Like I was telling them, it must’ve been Sweedee who called. And that wasn’t very nice of her, making us chase wild gooses and pick cotton at the same time.

Looks like Mama’s interested in that can. “May I see that?”

Mister Jordan’s gone out front.

And what’s that Mama’s using from her purse on that can? It looks like baby powder. Wow, Babe! Look at that! That must be some magic powder, because it made those spots on that can appear out of nowhere.

Mister North seems real anxious about what Mama’s doing. “I just knew she had something to do with that break-in up at the

camp. I'd planned on taking this to the state police, but Miss Babbitt here might've saved us some leg work."

The nice lady is saying, "But Vent, what if all she really wanted was to buy your daddy's paintings?"

"Lynn, baby, don't you get it? That was simply a diversion to get you and Chris out of there so her cronies could move in."

"I'm still not sure that had anything to do with her. Why would she go through the trouble of actually helping Chris?"

"Maybe to sucker him into taking her somewhere to meet up with those cronies after the job was done. That could put our money at risk, too. Remember how I gave him that credit card?"

Now Mama's peeling a piece of paper off the can. "I'll have to check this against our records. They're right here on my laptop."

"Take your time, Miss Babbitt. We want to be really sure on this one. Don't we, Lynn?"

Mister North seems to think he's got Sweedee, but the nice lady, Missus North, looks real unhappy about us catching up with her. I don't know why she likes Sweedee so much. I guess she's never met her and is fooled by the name, like we almost were.

Here comes Mister Jordan, Babe. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time, Mister North. The director wants us back in Atlanta. Allie, let's go."

Mama's saying, "Wait a minute, Clese. I'm almost done."

"What're you doing with a fingerprint kit?"

"You know how I like staying prepared. And if we can prove this is the same person, won't it be worth the trouble?"

"It's quite alright, Mister Jordan," Mister North is saying. "I'm willing to pay for whatever inconvenience this might cause."

"That's not really necessary."

"Clese, it's her. It's a match. Look!"

It's so crowded around Mama's pooter, that I can't see a thing. Can you, Babe?

Mister Jordan sure doesn't look sure. "We'll have to leave this to the authorities in Atlanta. The police and FBI are the ones

conducting the criminal investigation. Come on, Allie. The director is booking us on a flight back. Thank you, folks, for your time."

I tell you, Babe. Mister Jordan can really take the fun out of things.

Mister North must be trying to cheer him up, grabbing his hand and shaking it so. "I'd like a copy of those prints for showing our state troopers, if you wouldn't mind."

Mister Jordan said he'd send the facts back here, after we get home. But Mama has them right there. Why don't they send the facts to Mister North now? I'm still having trouble understanding this private eye business, Babe. Couldn't we just go find Sweedee and look at her fingers? Mister Jordan could hold her while Mama looks, and I could hold the pooter for Mama. And Babe, you could keep an eye on Sweedee's cronies, so she can't meet them and steal our money. Does that make sense to you? Me, neither. Let's just forget about the cronies. I'll let you rest till we're done with Sweedee.

°

BOY, how long's it going to take them to finish cleaning heaven? That devil must've made some mess up there. Maybe we can wait till they're done.

Mama seems to think so. "Clese, let's wait till the rain stops. It's not safe driving in this weather."

"Bet that plane's not going to wait."

"I don't understand you. We were onto something, and now you're in a hurry to give it all up."

"I don't like it anymore than you do, but we have to stick to the rules. You of all people should know that."

Something's making Mister Jordan real unhappy. I can tell. He keeps walking back and forth and looking at his watch. He must can't wait to send those facts. Babe, grown-ups can be so silly sometimes.

And the pretty but dumb woman who works for Mister North can't seem to wait, either, she just ran outside without an un-brillo. Can't she see the angels aren't done yet? There she comes again, all wet and such. That'll teach her. I wonder what's bugging her so, that she's …

Uh, oh, Babe! Mister Jordan just said a bad word.

"Clese!"

"I'm sorry, Allie. I'm sorry, Hanna. It's just that this isn't going how I'd expected it."

"Well, don't make such a fuss, then. Let's just go back home, regroup and see what happens next."

"I wish it were that simple."

"What do you mean?"

Here comes that nice Missus North. Maybe she'll give us some brownies for the plane ride. I'm tired of private eye work. I want to eat. Wish it were dinner. "Mister Jordan? Miss Babbitt? Can I talk to you?"

See that, Babe? There's not as much water coming down as before. They must be almost done cleaning up up there.

Mister Jordan's talking. "What are you saying, Missus North? That Feathers is going to turn herself in?"

"I think what Chris meant was that she wants to clear herself of the charges. And Chris is just trying to do what he thinks his daddy would've wanted him to do. But I'm really worried for him. If they run into that Syndicate …"

I bet when they get rid of all that water, heaven'll be so white and pretty, just like snow. Remember on the plane when we went over the clouds and the moon was shining so bright that it looked like snow on the ground? Of course, we didn't see any angels then, 'cause it was night and they were all asleep. But wouldn't it have been nice to have seen one playing in the snow? Well, we might've, if I hadn't fallen asleep myself.

"How about it, Clese?" Mama's saying. "I mean, it is on our way."

Mister Jordan's looking at his watch again. "Missus North, what time did you say they left?"

"Not more than 20 minutes ago," Missus North says. "If you give me your cell number, I can call you when I hear from Chris. And the Duck won't be that hard to spot, either. Believe me."

Oh, look, Babe! There's blue sky over there. The water will be gone soon, and the angels will be taking heaven back to God, all nice and clean. Won't he be proud!

"You up to this, Allie?"

"Sure. But the question is, what about Hanna? Honey?"

Mama, do angels ever make angels in the snow?

"What?"

You think, if Sweedee made angels in the snow, she could clear herself up and Sid the Cat wouldn't bother her anymore?

"Honest, I never know what she's talking about sometimes."

Missus North, I'd like a brownie now, if you still have some. Babe wants one, too.

Mister Jordan's laughing. "Allie, she's up to it, alright."

ENCOUNTERS

Clinton

Camp Moore

McComb

Kokomo

Hattiesburg

13

Chris

Rain. Did I mention how I hated driving in the rain?

Now, don't get me wrong. I loved that clean smell it gave everything, and that calm soothing sensation enveloping the ears as it splattered and rolled off a rooftop. With a sound as cozy as ocean surf all around, I could've listened to the rain all day long, especially if inside somewhere safe and dry and far removed from that relentless torrent.

But stuck out there and having to dodge traffic on Airline in the rain? I couldn't help but despise the billowing mass descending from that morning's sky, smothering every molecule of air with yet another molecule of moisture. A thick gray curtain of it, too, hung over all the stop-lights along the way, putting me right upon an intersection and having to mash the brake pedal. I mean, I needed to avoid collisions with other vehicles, if I wanted to get us out of town in one piece. And there went all that white striping of the pavement, duly submerged, leaving me to keep wondering whether the Duck was still in or out of bounds.

To top things off, no scenic vistas yet to speak of, just drab city buildings and flooded parking lots lining either side of the roadway, parading past us like scenes from an old black-and-white movie.

During that morning's soggy outing across North Baton Rouge, I

felt as though being targeted and bombarded by little nuisances coming at me from every direction. It would really tick me off, whenever some puny sports car or massive Dooley pickup sped past unannounced. I mean, come on buddy! What's the rush? Next appeared one of those "grannies" up ahead in a Buick taking her sweet time rounding a right-hand turn. They still give you a license, lady? And how about all those eighteen-wheelers staying right on top of the back bumper, blaring at me and swaying side-to-side with one blinding headlight flashing in and out of the side mirror.

Who knew I'd be navigating a virtual river flowing down Airline on that stormy morning we pulled out, its current congested with all sorts of "barges" trying to shove me this way or that? But I held tight to the wheel, alright. I mean, I needed to take things slow for awhile, till I could get a firm handle on the old Duck. And no time left for studying the neighboring drivers either, eh, Chris?

Turned out, the Duck had a slight alignment problem, causing me to keep having to tug the wheel toward the left to hold that hulk of metal in the right lane. And I just knew that, any minute, the engine would start sputtering and choking like that elephant-cat had done back there at the camp. Any minute, I'd feel the whole massive frame of it suddenly coming to a dead stop. Any minute now, I thought.

There I sat, stuck between "Niagara" streaming down the front windshield and the great "Smokies" pouring in from behind. I should say, the great Miss Smoky, her leaving such a thick smelly cloud of it lingering in the air. She never let up, did she?

"Hey, North!" she hollered, spouting off a few more puffs.

"What?"

"North!"

"I'm driving. What?"

"They've got *Bridge on the River Kwai* coming on. Haven't seen that one in years."

Did I say, *stuck*? Stuck between two cushions, more like it.

'Cause we're stuck in between
Two cushions and a dream …

Man, I could've used a pen and paper right about then. Stuck, I tell you.

Again, she hollered, "Hey, North! I'm using your credit card for something called pay-per-view. Mind?"

°

BEING THUS STUCK behind the wheel, I was able to draw some comfort from that idea I'd once come up with, of how driving down the road was not unlike the act of making music. The music of the road, I called it. No kidding! There was a definite kind of music found in driving, let me tell you, something that just couldn't be spelled out in words. The instrument of choice might have been a car or truck or RV even. And did you ever notice how the pavement itself gave you those five staff lines to work with? While headed down some two-lane sometime, check it out: there's the two outer stripes, the center line, and those four dark strips left between the imprints from traffic bath ways, all paralleling each other the whole gamut. Well, there you go, then. Sheet music, right there on the highway.

Now, first time out, came the setting of the beat, beginning with the tick-tock of the turn signal and the shifting from first to second to third and so on, till that cross-country jaunt came upon some heavy urban traffic and had to readjust its rhythm to the new flow of things. With every uphill causing a pressing of the *accelerando*, followed by the downhill side forcing a *ritardando*, that swinging melody might then lead itself to some stop sign or stoplight, resolving one leg of the journey with its intended cadence.

Next came those cop spottings, critics of the road forever harping about observing the prescribed tempo. Even trying to tune one's instrument with all those other drivers, a musical roadster

might be left with playing either a solo gig or else providing back-up harmony to the rest of the group's jamming. But the real kicker came, when some unexpected turn or detour introduced a complete key-change.

Such a change did, in fact, occur right after we'd rounded the bend where Airline headed westward toward the river. How many times, I wondered, had I driven Highway 61 to Natchez for the annual blues festival and not seen that sign for the exit onto Highway 67? That was a new one on me.

The towering green sign I saw coming up gave directions for such places as Baker, Zachary … even Clinton? I recalled Clinton lying somewhere west of Greensburg. Never before had I thought to take this other back-way to I-55. It could've cut some hours off our trip, I figured. With the rain already starting to let up, finally, I found this the perfect opportunity for modulating to that brighter key I'd been waiting for.

"Yeah!" continued Miss Movie Buff. "I just love watching William Holden kick butt. You know, I think I saw the guy once, coming out of a restaurant. Looked nothing like he does in the movies. Aah! They never do."

Following a quick slip over into the exit lane, I got the Duck onto what started out as Plank Road, going up past the airport before bringing us through the town of Baker. A grassy median had split the roadway by then—like providing double staves for a duet? But still, more stop lights, more 'burbs, more creeping cadences. What I really needed was more open spaces with which to freely compose.

"Aw, rats!" came another ramble from the sofa. "Says I have to wait another freaking hour before it shows. Well, let's see what else I can kill some static with."

After the last of the shopping centers had gotten behind us, Plank Road's four lanes merged into 67's two, as houses started to back away from the pavement's shoulders. Beyond Comite River, low flat lands rose into rolling hills. Those dark clouds with their

loads of moisture were now moving away to the north, which was great by me, considering we wouldn't have to deal with anymore wet weather once the road turned eastward.

By this point, a certain notion hit me. I had just met this Feathers woman the day before and garnered next to nothing about her, other than the fact that she smoked way too much and had a nasty habit of trying to correct everything I said or did. Strangely, the notion resembled how, in years past, Mama would often hand me a bunch of clothes to try on, only for me to leave the bunch of them hanging in the closet, never to know a single wrinkle from this wayward dude. In the same strange way, my decision to head over with Sweedee to Atlanta appeared as another untried notion being laid upon my noggin, the kind I couldn't just leave hanging from the bar but would have to address sooner or later. Like, was it really *my* decision to begin with? Or could something else have been directing me—"calling the tune" so to speak—daring me to forget all those old wayward impulses from before and try on some new ideas for a change?

°

WELL, change did come soon enough—a change of attitude, at least. Perhaps even a tinge of regret might've been setting in there, as well.

It started where 67 ended at Highway 10. After driving the main strip through Clinton, we came upon this dude sitting on the corner curb near the stoplight and holding a piece of cardboard which read, "WILL WORK FOR FOOD." I'd seen a few of those back in Birmingham, what with the steel mills going through their ups and downs and guys being laid off and all. But in the little rural town of Clinton, Louisiana?

"*Sleepless in Seattle*?" Sweedee let out. "Huh! Try New Orleans during Mardi Gras. That'll keep you tossing and turning."

"How about that!" I observed.

“How about what?” Miss Couch-hugger grumbled. “I mean, it was New Orleans, for Pete Fountain’s sake.”

At last, I’d gotten her eyes off the tube for once. They’d been lassoed there all morning, leaving me in the position of keeping us from sliding off the rain-slick highway into a ditch somewhere.

“No, I meant that,” I tried again. “And in the little town of Clinton of all places.”

“Clinton?” came the clueless retort. “Thought you were heading for Vicksburg. When did this sideshow start?”

“Found a shortcut. Anyway, I was speaking of that dude on the corner over there, begging for food. Can you beat that?”

“Let me see what you’re squawking about now.” Sweedee leaned in between the front seats, head ducked, lips clinging to yet another cigarette. “Oh, him. He must be a rookie. Let me set him straight.” She then withdrew and disappeared. Before I knew it, the side door had creaked open, with her stepping out … and with that homemade casserole dish Lynn had slaved over!

“Hey, that’s our lunch!” I hollered.

Sweedee handed the whole thing over to the dude, could you believe that? Miss Humanitarian there then proceeded to advise the bum, “Why work? Here, free food.”

The dude was beside himself, wanting to hug her and all. Sweedee just waved him away and stepped back in.

“What did you go and do that for?” I said. “What are we going to eat now?”

“So, what’s the fuss? Just find us a good dive somewhere along the way. And hurry up. I’m starving.”

A bit of grumbling on my part, but what the hey. It’d be nice to get a good sit-down dinner, especially with having the bucks to pay for it now. Heaving a sigh, I decided to let that one slide and made the turn onto 10, pointing us toward I-55.

Sweedee was back on the sofa and got real quiet for a while there. I thought she might have fallen asleep, which gave me some much needed relief.

After getting beyond Clinton and the old Masonic cemetery on its outskirts, the highway entered a long stretch of wooded country, with plenty of blue sky opening up ahead. For several miles, most houses stood far back from the roadway—perhaps to ensure them some extra privacy, no doubt. Here and there, brief intervals of rolling pasture land spread far back, as well. We were about to pass a small general store with gas pumps, but I saw no need to stop since the Duck indicated it had already been topped off back at the shop. More and more expanses of woodland predominated, breaking off at the Amite River bridge. The river waters were swollen from the rain, and probably just as high and muddy back down at the camp.

The woods thickened again and didn't let up much until we reached Greensburg. With the speed limit dropping to 25 mph through town, I took it easy to avoid any unnecessary ticketing. Cruising through that quiet little community, the Duck passed up a number of front porches which sat right up next to the highway. Among the more remarkable features: two large churches, Methodist and Baptist, faced off over the roadway, and one house trailer sported two separate satellite dishes out front. Over at the far edge of town, crowds of pine trees resumed their march beside us, until the interstate.

Reaching I-55, where I'd brought the Duck up the overpass and was prepping for the turn-lane to the north-bound on-ramp on the other side, I saw my chance for seeing the Duck perform under cruise control and at top speed. It'd be smooth sailing from there on out, I just knew it.

Miss Couch Potato started whining and saying, "What are you slowing down for? We're there already?"

"I'm gonna head up I-55 from here," I called back to her. "It'll make up some time."

"Hold the phone, Ace. No interstates! OK?"

"But it's the fastest route."

"Forget it, kid. You're not getting us stuck on that crazy roller-

coaster ride. Got it?"

She kept making such a fuss about it, I saw no point in arguing the point any longer. So, I dodged the turn lane and slipped back onto 10. Score one more for Miss Scaredy-cat.

Leaving behind 55's on-ramp—leaving it with a big sigh, I should add—I looked over to my left and saw this beat-up old pickup parked on the opposite shoulder of the highway. Two dudes were sitting in it, both rather scruffy looking. They didn't seem like they were broke down or anything, just sitting there, smoking and staring. One, the driver, had this stunned look on his face while seeing us pass. Maybe the spiffiness of the Duck had caught his eye.

We soon came to 51 North, a two-lane running parallel to the old Illinois Central railroad. While I waited on some cars to pass before making the left-hand turn, in the side mirror appeared that pickup again, pulling right up to the bumper and honking its horn. I couldn't figure the guy's problem and tried ignoring the imposition. However, they stayed on our tail all the way up 51, even after we'd gone some ways and reached the stoplight at a little crossroads. That's when he started honking again and waving his hand at me. I was getting real pissed and felt I would need to deal with this dude's rudeness one way or another. Obviously, he felt his own need for some sort of attention. With no good place to pull over, I decided to turn in to Camp Moore up the highway.

"What?" Sweedee whined again. "Another shortcut?"

"Some dude's waving me to pull over. I've gotta see what's up. It won't take long."

We took the turn, crossed the tracks and entered the gate of one of the Confederacy's last strongholds, Camp Moore. A training ground during the Civil War, it had been turned into a state commemorative area, with a large plantation-style building which housed the museum, set in the midst of spacious grounds where soldiers once camped and marched and prepared for going off to war. At the moment, there appeared to be a lot of visitors there, with a large field coming up full of parked cars and trucks. The

activities beyond the trees and over behind the museum convinced me that a Civil War reenactment must've been underway. With the weather cleared, the sunshine was gorgeous and the spring breeze fantastic, perfect for a bunch of men to get out and play soldier. I would've headed over to the goings-on myself and taken in some of the history and culture from way back, if not for having to deal with that pestering dude on my tail.

While I was getting the Duck turned around to park, the old pickup came around and jumped right in front of me. Scared the bejeebers out of me, too, forcing a slam on the brakes. Man, I was pissed for sure then. The dude, without being the least apologetic, started hollering and pointing under the Duck and saying how he saw something leaking out on the road. I popped the hood and looking around spotted the radiator hose slightly loose with steaming coolant dripping out. It was a wonder I'd never noticed the temperature gauge getting that much into the red zone, what with my being occupied with the annoyance tailing the Duck. But things sure got hot right quick, when I felt the muzzle of a revolver pressed against my skull and heard its hammer cocked. Woe, Nelly!

"How about we head inside your RV?" the dude said. "There are some goods you're transporting that my boss will be real interested in seeing. And take it slow there, son."

After we'd gotten around to the side, there was Sweedee stepping out the door, cigarette in hand and a smirk on her face.

The guy pressed the barrel harder against my scalp and said, "Who's that? Your whore?"

"What?" I replied. "No, she's just …"

"Yeah, I'm his whore," Sweedee said, smiling and batting her eyes.

And she was acting serious about it, too, leading me to wonder if I'd misjudged her intentions all along. Had I really teamed up with some sort of slut after all?

The other dude came around the Duck and said, "Hey, Biff! The boss just called and said he's headed this way and to stay tight."

“So, while we wait,” said the dude Biff, “How about me and your little whore do a little business. What’ll you say there, darlin’?”

Sweedee answered, “Sure, but I ain’t free.”

“I’m not her pimp!” I tried reminding the dude. “Sweedee, this is no time for games.”

“What game?” she replied. “We could use a few extra bucks for gas, don’t you think, North?”

While Biff was handing the gun over to the other dude who he called Deke—some crazy names, huh?—Sweedee started giving me this funny wink. Turns out, this *was* a game of hers, just like she’d done with Vent Junior, and her way of letting me know how I had better go along with it. Scratch that notion I’d had earlier.

After Sweedee had gotten old Biff inside, I turned to the Deke dude and asked, “What’s this about? You guys work for that Syndicate outfit?”

“Hush up!” said Deke. “Ain’t none of your own business, see? Besides, the boss’ll set y’all straight, once he gets here. We were just waiting to in-uh-sep ya up there near Jackson. That is, ‘til ya decided to head over this way insteads.”

“How’d you know we were coming this way?”

“We been trackin’ ya. See, right there under the hood, there’s a little … oops! I furrgot. We wasn’t supposed to tell ya about that. Mind your own and no more questions. Hear?”

Right about then, some serious screaming could be heard coming from inside the Duck. Soon after, the door swung open and Sweedee stepped out, dragging Biff by the hair. She had a stun gun, of all things, pressed to his neck.

“Yo, Deacon-blue!” she hollered to Deke. “Drop it! Or I’ll castrate your buddy here.” She then brought the gun down and pointed it at the dude’s groin.

Old Deke let out a yelp and let go the pistol like it was red hot.

“Get it, North!” she hollered at me.

I picked up the gun, not sure what she wanted me to do with it.

"Him, kid!" she then nodded. "Aim it at him."

I then directed the gun Deke's way.

Sweedee shoved Biff over toward the pickup. Deke promptly scampered over there, as well.

"Here," she said to me, "give me that." She wanted the pistol.

Of course, I obliged. I had no intentions of using it anyway.

"Now then," she said. "Time for you two dodo-brains to hit the road. I'd say right about now."

Sweedee then blew a hole in the truck's back windshield. Then, somehow she took out the taillights, too. Man, some shot! I was learning some things about this woman that made me wonder what I'd really hooked up with.

And turned out, there was no chance of anyone hearing the shots she'd gotten off, what with the nearby reenactment starting at the same moment, a round of cannon-fire acting as cover. I guessed that none of those people over there had a clue as to where the *real* battle was taking place.

"Oh, and Biff honey!" Sweedee hollered, as they were climbing in. "Hope it was good for you, too, sugar!"

Well, those two peeled out of there as quick as spit, let me tell you.

I then let into Sweedee for a change, griping, "Do you know you could've gotten us killed? And where'd you get that zapper from?"

"Just a little traveler's insurance," she replied. "I like staying prepared."

"What if it'd not worked? What if he had really done something to you? Raped you, or … worse?"

"Worse? Worse? Tell me, North. What could be worse. What's worse than eating stale moldy bread from a dumpster? What's worse than spending a whole day out in the freezing wind and rain? What's worse than trying to sleep in a cardboard box while dope dealers and hookers scream at each other ten feet away? What's worse than people looking at you like you're some mangy dog, or pretending not to look, 'cause they're afraid you might think they

cared?"

Now, all the while of her ranting, she kept waving and pointing that gun my way.

I said to her, "Could you just … you know …?" nervous as heck she might squeeze the trigger by mistake.

"Oh, this thing?" Sweedee said, finally getting the hint. She then tossed the pistol in a nearby ditch. "Now that that's settled, I really need a smoke. And some coffee, too. Let's get going real soon, okay? Oh, and sorry you had to get called a pimp, kid. No hard feelings, huh?"

14

Sweedee

11:43 AM FRI

I tell you, Ruby. All these talk shows are nothing but a racket. I mean, there goes that big woman smacking her boyfriend with her purse. What woman in her right mind would go wasting a good snake-skin purse like that? And all because of him sleeping with her grandmother. What she should've done was save the purse and just hit him with the chair. Man! Women are just not what they used to be. I mean, they don't make them like the one's in the Bible anymore.

11:52 AM FRI

Ruby, you'll never believe the good blessing your old mom just got: a Bible, stuck in the drawer back here by the bed. I wonder if Vent … well, who knows but the Big Guy? I owe you one, Big G.

By the way, looks like we're parked near a restaurant at the moment, in a place called McComb. North had to go check something under the hood, so I decided to chill it back here in the sleeping quarters before we headed over somewhere for lunch. Wouldn't you know, I'd hit upon this little surprise while relaxing

and grabbing a smoke?

Let's see. Oh, yeah. Can't believe I turned right to it. Jael, the girl who pegged the old rascal's head real good. Yeah, she was a dynamite gal alright. He was a mean old scoundrel, and she started off giving him the soft treatment till he was snoozing, you see. Then, she let him have it, right between the baby blues. Oh, yeah! Jael's one of my favorites. I must've been thinking of her earlier, when those two yahoos showed up. They were looking for trouble, I could tell that. They'd gotten behind us right before the campground, honking like geese, right after I'd just gotten through telling North to skip the stupid interstate and stay on the two-lane. I mean, his finding an alternate shortcut was one thing, but then wanting to jump into the suicide lane like that?

It had already stopped raining, you see, and here he was about to take us onto that murderous expressway, when I yelled, "No interstates!" A person's got to be crazy to go on one of those things. Well, after he gave in and kept following the highway, us still looking for a good place to eat, some old jalopy comes up from behind, honking its tootie. North said the guy was waving at him to pull over, so he did, turning to cross a railroad and stopping near a field full of cars. I was watching from the window, as they were looking under the front end where one of the idiots was pointing, and that's when the guy pulled this gun and started steering North to the side.

I decided it was time to light up again and step out and help the kid. You know, like I'd promised the Big Guy I'd do.

The one's name by the way was Biff. Can you believe it? Yeah, I knew this was going to be easy.

"Is that your whore?" that yahoo with the gun said, laughing.

"Yeah, I'm his whore," I said. "You boys looking for some action?"

"Sweedee!" North hollered. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up, boy!" That was the gun toter, Biff, talking. "We've gotta wait here till the boss shows. So whiles we wait, how about

me and the whore do a little business—a little collaborating, as they say."

"Sure," I said. "But I ain't free."

"Oh, I think you'll give me one on the house, or else I'll have to drop your pimp right here," raising the gun toward the kid's head.

North had to go and yell, "I'm not her pimp!" I should've taken time to school him on how Sweedee was used to handling trash, so he'd know how to play along. But I had to do a little improvising this time to save his hide.

"I think I can spare a freebie," I said, winking at Biff. "This time, that is."

"Good golly!" the dope let out. "Hold this, Deke," handing the gun to his partner, "and keep an eye on the pimp till I'm done."

"What if the boss shows up?" the Deke dude said. Yeah, he seemed like the dumb one next to dumber there, so I figured the kid could handle that one with no problem.

"Don't worry about that," said Biff. "Just holler if he drives up. This shouldn't take long."

"Slow down there, sugar," I told the dopehead. "I've got plenty of juice to keep you humming for quite a spell."

"Ooh, baby! Let's do this then."

Now, I didn't want him getting any blood on the white leather of the sofa, so I got him settled on the bed instead. You see, I hadn't gotten any sheets on yet, so I figured getting the blood off the bare mattress shouldn't prove any great chore.

Biff settled in pretty good. "You go first."

"Alright." So I dropped my robe. "Now you, baby. Here, let Sweedee-pie help you with that shirt."

I started then unbuttoning his raggedy shirt, while reaching under the pillow for what I'd stashed there. Turns out, there was that same spider tattoo on his arm as on Vent's. Regardless, I needed some bare skin if I wanted to give him the full treatment. And that's when I let him have it. Man, he squealed like a banshee. So, I gave him another jolt. Then, I grabbed him by his greasy hair

—hard to do, let me tell you—and held my “flashlight” up to his juggler. Just a little something I picked up in that hardware store back in town. I’d told the guy behind the counter to give me the strongest one he had. He laid out a 100,000 volts on the counter. “Got anything hotter?” I inquired. Well, that was it, so I figured it’d have to do. Certainly enough for old Biff there, let me tell you.

I then hauled him outside, held the thing to his crotch, and told his buddy to drop it or I’d castrate stud-boy. Man, old Deke’s eyes lit up, and that six-shooter dropped like a rock. I told the kid to get it, then I shoved Biff toward Deke. I figured I could make my point stick better if I shot out their back window.

They were boogieing it alright. But before they got in the truck, I hollered, “Oh, Biff honey! Hope it was good for you, too, sugar.” Then I took out a taillight or two, and they sped off.

Yeah, taking out the trash never felt sweeter.

Wonder if the kid’s ready to go on over now. Man, I’m famished. Talk to you on the flip-side, baby.

15

Hanna

Babe, it's like I said before. When I try to get in on what grown-ups are talking about, they tell me to go color or something. They're so afraid I might figure things out before they do, don't you think? Well, I can't help it if I have a gift for this private eye stuff. Maybe I get it from Mama.

You know, Mister Jordan has gotten real popular with the police everywhere he goes. They all seem to trust him with their mail, always stopping him and giving him letters to take for them. So far, he's gotten three this morning, although he doesn't seem too happy to have to take them, maybe because he's so busy trying to catch Sweedee and doesn't have time.

"So, Skipper. Another log entry there?" That's Mama. She doesn't seem too happy about it neither. Guess she'd rather he stick with private eye work and lay off the side job of taking other people's mail for them.

He's adding this one to the others in the drawer in front of Mama. "I'll turn them in to the office when we get back. The company will take care of them. No problem then."

"But the problem is they're slowing us down. You can keep it just above the speed limit without worrying about being pulled over. Besides, there's no need to endanger ourselves, especially with

a child on board."

"Fine. For Hanna's sake, I'll be more careful."

Hear that, Babe? We're important on this job. Just wish they'd listen to me more. I think I've gotten this Sweedee woman figured out enough to know what she's thinking. She's thinking somebody's after her, so she's not going to go where they think she's going but goes where they least think she will. That has to be how she's stayed on the run for so long.

Mama's saying, "Are you sure this is the right way, though?"

"Didn't Missus North say they left Clinton and were headed toward the interstate? Well, the map shows only one interstate out this way, and that's I-55. It's the only possible choice if they want to make better time."

Babe, I've gotta let them know.

Mister Jordan, maybe Sweedee doesn't want those bad people figuring out where she's going and will try tricking them with the inner-steak. Don't you think so, Mama?

"Honey, why don't you get out the coloring book Missus North gave you and stay quiet for a while?"

See, Babe? I wish they'd put us to better use, seeing as we're on this job by axe-it-dunt and ought to be of some kind of help and not such a burden. It'd pay for everybody's food at least, wouldn't you think?

My, there's a lot of tall trees out this way. We must be in a forest. If we have to stop, you better stay close to me, Babe, so no wild animals get you. Hope we get out of it soon. Oh, there's a big river, too, with lots of water. Don't want to fall into that one, so hold on tight, Babe. Hard to think where Sweedee might've taken her dee-ter, what with all these trees and that river in the way.

•

WE'RE out of the woods now, Babe. See? There're more people's houses. Good to be back in sybil's-libation for a change.

“Allie, let’s stop at that store up here and get some snacks for Hanna. Once we’re on 55, we might not be able to stop for awhile.”

“Good idea. I could use a little something myself.”

Don’t worry, Babe. I’ll share mine with you. This is where we earn our keep, anyway.

“Now, nothing too sugary, Clese. Try to see if they have fruit juices, too. Honey, what kind of juice do you want?”

Me and Babe wouldn’t mind some orange juice with some cereal.

“No cereal here, sweetheart. Clese, get some granola bars while you’re at it. Oh, and some cheese crackers, and maybe those slim jim things and …”

“Do you need me to make a list?”

Reminds me. Wonder what Sweedee eats? Let’s see. She has to stay on the move, so it’d probably be fast food all the time. That’s okay every now and then, but I’d get tired of eating greasy fries and crunchy chicken, too. Maybe she orders a pete’s-up every so often. She’s grown up, so no sugary stuff for her, except maybe a doughnut with her coffee, just like Mister Jordan has when he’s on the run and can’t get a decent bite like he says.

You know, I still think Sweedee’s trying to get us to use that inner-steak. But where else would she go, unless there’s a way to keep heading back to her home in Atlanta? It always seems she’s heading that way for some reason. That’s what I’m figuring. We just need to try again and make Mister Jordan think like we think, which is how Sweedee thinks. Although, Mister Jordan already seems to know a lot about her and is trying to teach Mama, too. Mama’s just too stubborn to listen to us, that’s all. She likes playing it safe all the time. But inner-steaks are full of fast moving cars and big trucks. So the thing to do would be to stay on this road. That’s it, Babe! We just have to make them see how safer it is where Sweedee’s going, because Sweedee likes keeping a low … what Mister Jordan says about people who don’t want to be spotted. Pro-fly, that’s it. Or low-fly. Something like that.

Okay, we’re back on the road. I’m glad Mister Jordan thought to

get us something to eat, Babe, because doing private eye work on an empty belly is tough.

"You know," Mister Jordan's saying, "I've been thinking about what the child was saying. Feathers is bound to know someone's after her and'll want to keep a low profile."

That's it, Babe! That pro-fly word, whatever that means. Wonder if it's like keeping your head down so the teacher don't call on you when you haven't been paying attention in class but looking out the window. Sometimes it works, sometimes doesn't.

Mama's talking. "Well, seeing as the younger brother is doing the driving, wouldn't he be deciding things? Mister North did say he seemed eager to get there the best way. Unless, of course, he's the type who's liable to be swayed by a woman's will. What a wimp! Just like Jack."

"Looks like the map also showed another highway they could've headed for. It's not too far past the interstate. Here's the overpass coming up now. Do we take the easy route or try the cover?"

Mama, I don't think Sweedee would want to go that way, even if the guy's a wimp. She'd go the other to keep the bad people from following.

"Well, I … guess so. I mean, it's what I'd do, not be rushed but take my time to avoid any accidents. But if we're wrong …"

Mister Jordan's saying, "We can always wait for the guy to call Missus North to verify. If they did take 55, we can just get back on it somewhere up the line. Little lady, if you're right, I'll buy you a banana split."

Here that, Babe. We can split it, too, if we find Sweedee. Maybe let Sweedee have some, too.

°

Mama, I really need to …

"Clese, I think Hanna has to go. But I don't see anywhere we can stop safely."

"There might be something up past the light. Oh, there's Camp

Moore. I'd forgotten it was over this way. They should have some restrooms there."

"What's Camp Moore?"

"It's an old Civil War park. I visited it once. Lots of history. Here it is coming up."

Don't worry, Babe. We're not going camping. Not yet. Maybe in the summer. But it looks like a lot of other people are camping out there today. Lots of cars have shown up. There's also a really big house, almost like a mansion. Their restrooms should be really fancy, too. Either way, I hope there's not a line. I really need to potty.

THE LADY inside was really nice, saying we were welcome to look around. And lots of old stuff in big glass boxes. But Mama said maybe another time. It'd be nice to see everything. Maybe after we find Sweedee, we can come back.

Look at over there, Babe. There are a bunch of men in fancy old clothes running around and shooting at each other among those shade trees, and lots of people watching them do it, too. Probably not real, or they might get arrested. Don't know why all those people would find that fun to watch. I'd rather camp than fight someone.

Also, there's this smoky smell, don't you think, Babe? You know, there's all kinds of smoke, like from cig-uh-rits and cars and wood burning. This is more like gun smoke, like I always smelled when Mama would come back from trying out her gun. No mistaking that one.

Here comes Mister Jordan with something in his hand. "Allie, take a look at these."

"Looks like cigarette butts," Mama's saying.

"When we were at North Brothers, I noticed one of these on the floor of Mister North's office, like it'd been chewed off … just like

these were. Seems our gal likes her tobacco full strength. Also, I found this. What do you make of that?"

Mister Jordan pulled a gun from his belt and handed it to Mama. Looks kind of dirty. Maybe one of the men shooting at each other gave it to him as a soothing-ear.

"Ugh!" Mama's making a funny face, holding the thing by her fingers. "Where did you dig this up from? A Colt single-action, a few rounds left in the cylinder, and smells like it's been recently fired."

"It wasn't too far from where I found the butts. If they were here, there might've been trouble. I doubt if anyone would've heard the shots what with the noise from the reenactment going on."

"Any … blood at the scene?"

"Nope. Some broken glass, though. And some deep tire tracks in the wet ground, kind of like from a motor home that had been parked there, you think? Little lady, seems I owe you a banana split after all."

Yay!

Mama's asking, "How far ahead do you think they are?"

"Couldn't be that long, not if they lingered long enough to have a smoke or two. We best get going. Shame. Would've liked to go over and observe the battle and check out the exhibits, visit the camps and trade notes with some of the re-enactors."

"Always the history buff, huh, Clese?"

Buff? Wonder what that is. Must be like cleaning up a crime scene. Buff. I don't know, Babe. All these new private eye words we've got to learn. Boy, we've really been learning a lot on this trip, haven't we?

Look Babe! Here comes one of those reacters that Mister Jordan was talking about. He looks really tired, too, having to carrying all that stuff on him. Wonder where he gets those old clothes from. They're like the ones we saw in the pictures in that big house.

Mister Jordan's talking to him. "Hey there, soldier! Who won?"

"Well," he says, "the Yankees won the coin toss, so I guess it's

gonna be them today. We gave'em a good fight, though."

"You look beat," Mama's saying to him.

"Am I! Didn't get much sleep last night, plus having to run across a field and dodging for cover in that creek bed. But at least I got to be one of the casualties this time, so I'm done."

"What? You're not staying till the end?"

"Naw! No sense in it. If it'd been for real, my life would be over and my family back home would probably starve. As it is, I get to go home and enjoy what's left of the weekend before going to work Monday. That way, my wife and kids still have food on the table. But it's all for fun anyway."

Mister Jordan's being nice and shaking his hand. "Well, take care driving home."

"You folks have a good one then."

16

Chris

Back before we left Camp Moore, I had to do a little maintenance on the Duck, mainly with fixing that loose radiator hose and locating the tracking device Deke had been stupid enough to mention. Luckily, there were some jugs of antifreeze stowed away in one of the lower compartments, along with a number of other useful items like a toolkit, jumper cables, motor oil, an ice chest … oh, and Sweedee spotted some folding lawn chairs and grabbed one for herself.

We then headed up 51 towards McComb, first passing through Magnolia with its many old homes ranging from farm-style shacks to antebellum-style mansions. Lots of hilly country up that way, as well, with nothing but pine forests spread for miles around.

Entering McComb and after getting across that major X-shaped intersection of highways 51 and 98, I pulled into a Grab-N-Go to make sure the gas was still topped off good. That would keep us till Atlanta. I also took the time to check the oil then scan the engine for problem spots. Making my way around the Duck, I took a look at the tires and made sure nothing was leaking underneath. Everything seemed secure enough.

Due to Sweedee's ultimatum regarding interstate highways—no longer as hard to swallow now as before—I had to plot out some

winding two-lane back roads which would get us into Birmingham, at least before this dude behind the wheel conked-out from exhaustion. I mean, even stretching the 55 mph speed limit just enough to get past every crawling granny and farmer's tractor without getting pulled over by some zealous state trooper—not to mention those stop lights and stop signs parked out in the middle of nowhere—well, that could fray any road warrior's nerves.

I'd been punching buttons on the GPS and scanning and storing routes for a while, when I looked around and noticed the TV off and the sofa empty. I figured Sweedee must've went to the can or something. It was nearly 1:00, as good a time as any to check our provisions in the fridge. It seemed Vent Junior must've sent one of his shop-hands to a convenience store, what with nothing in there but a six-pack of beer, a pack of bologna and a jar of mayo. In the freezer part, I found a box of popsicles and a bag of ice. A pound of coffee and a loaf of bread were left on the counter. Yeah, we'd be eating in high style on this trip—not!

Getting to the back of the Duck, I found Sweedee sitting on the bed. Rather, the mattress of the bed, since no one had bothered fixing it up with linens. She had a book lying open in her lap, a finger pressed to a page, and her eyes closed. I figured she might've fallen asleep reading, except she then opened her eyes, took one look at me and let her jaw drop. Almost as quickly, she shut the book and gave me this sour look like I'd interrupted something.

"Oh," she said with a tone of disappointment. "It's you, North. Have you ever thought of shaving that face of yours? You look like you're from the Middle East or something."

"What're you reading there?"

She tossed the book on the bed and got a cigarette out. "Just something I found in a drawer. So, let's eat! What great fixin's did Junior leave us with?"

"Well, after you ditched Lynn's casserole, there's hardly anything left worth speaking of. I thought we'd just go hunt up a place in town."

“Yeah, I’m fair game for most anything, as long as it’s high class, you understand. So, what kind of chow’s close by?”

“Let’s see …” I went up front and surveyed the neighborhood. We must’ve parked in the tourist-trap section of town, what with the gift shops and boutiques for the chicks and the game arcades and daiquiri stalls for the dudes. Not one fast food joint in sight, though. There was a fancy looking restaurant on the other corner which stood out for its hanging plants and stringed-lights.

Sweedee came up from behind and pointed with that unlit cigarette, saying, “How about that dump?”

“Dump?” I shot back. “That place looks kind of ritzy, don’t you think? How about we drive around and find a burger or chicken joint instead?”

“What’s wrong with that one?”

“Well, I don’t know. It’s kinda …”

“Come on! You can afford it. Let’s go check out their grub. Can’t be that bad. I mean, they’ve got Christmas lights strung in their bushes, for crying out loud.”

°

I DID TRY BEING A GENTLEMAN, wanting to get the entrance door for her. But Sweedee just slipped ahead of me and helped herself. Inside, the place was dimly lit with these fake gaslights on the walls. An oriental rug stretched from the door to a desk were a man in purple jacket and bow tie stood grinning at us. Sweedee was about to waltz right past the dude, when he lost the grin and held her by the shoulder, saying, “Pardon me, ma’am. We have a dress code here.”

With one smooth move, she drew her robe shut and tied it tight. “There, I’m decent!” She then sashayed some more into the main serving area.

The man, who I figured was the maitre’d, started after her, whispering loudly, “But ma’am! Ma’am!”

“Just let me,” I told him. “I’ll get her.”

I caught up with Miss Party-crasher halfway across the room, in the midst of tables with people eating and talking and looking up askance at what had just sauntered past. They were eyeing me, as well. The maitre’d and another waiter were coming up fast.

“Sweedee!” I whispered. “Sweedee! I think we should find another place, don’t you think? They don’t seem to like our attire, if you get my drift.”

“Yeah, so I heard,” she grumbled back. “Hey, that must be the smoking area over there, since no one’s sitting in it. Come on, North.”

Before I had a chance, she was seated at a table and lighting up. That’s when the two dudes in the suits caught up.

“Sir,” one leaned into me to say, “we have a policy here. You and your, uh … companion will have to leave.”

I giggled and said, “Yeah, sorry there. We were just about to.”

Sweedee blew a puff and waved her cigarette at me. “Show him your card, North. That oughta change his tune.”

I sighed and pulled out the gold card from my pants pocket. “Look, I can cover for any trouble she might be causing you gents.”

It was like someone had turned up the lighting. Those two dudes’ eyes went ga-ga right then and there.

“Oh, no trouble at all, sir,” said the maitre’d, chuckling. “Certainly, sir. But perhaps we could find you and your guest a nicer table in the back.”

“This one’s fine,” said Sweedee. “Wait a minute.” She lifted a glass of water, sniffed it and took a sip. “Yeah, we’ll stay here. Just bring us a couple of your high-priced menus then come back in a few.”

Taking a seat across the table from Her Highness, I then took in the place. Most of the diners, dressed as they were in suits and dresses, had gone back to their own business of eating and chatting. While I looked over the menu—rather, my eyes bugging out over the names and prices—Sweedee had already started chowing down

on bread sticks and water.

"Mmmm!" she moaned. "Good chlorinated water at last. Say, North. You ever do any reading? You know, books and things like that? Perhaps the Bible, maybe?

"The last thing I read was Daddy's affidavit. Before that, just the sports page a few days ago. I don't get into reading much. Either I'm too busy or too tired."

"Well, you oughta. There's some good advice in there. Take the book of Ruth, for instance. You've heard of Ruth and Naomi, haven't you? Now, those were some first-class old gals. And then there was good old Borax."

"Borax? You want me to read about soap?"

"No, no. Borax. Or maybe it was Bonzo. Bozo? Anyhoo! Now, there was one hot dude. He was Kind David's great-grandpappy to boot. Kind of reminded me of your dad."

"Speaking of which," I said, "I'm thinking those two dudes back aways were buddies of his from the Syndicate. They seemed to know about where we were headed and with what."

"You mean, Barf and Lunkhead? What makes you think those two dodos even had skulls much less gray matter? Or with the balls, even. Yeah, I can freaking *not* see that one."

"Well, Lunkhead turned me onto this." I pulled out the device I'd found under the hood of the Duck and laid it on the table.

"What's that?" she said, picking it up and eyeing it.

"Has to be some sort of tracking device. Deke kept complaining about us not taking the interstate, like we were supposed to or something."

"So?" She tossed it back down and started crunching on another bread stick.

"So, I'm thinking somebody in the shop must've put it there."

"How about your buddy?"

"No, Mason's clean. I'm sure of it. Now, it could've been her, but … no, scratch that one, too."

"Her who? The sweet one?"

“No! I’m talking about … but could she have really pulled off something like this?”

“You’re implicating too many females here, kid. She who?”

“Darla. She was in the shop when I went in with Mason to check out the Duck.”

“Ponytails?”

“Could be … no, can’t be. That’s not like her. I mean, when we were in high school, she’d kiss up to any sucker she could, to get him to go put gas in her Mercedes. She’s definitely not the mechanical type.”

“Maybe she had help. I mean, if she’s low enough to sleep with Junior, could’ve been doing some of the other guys and suckered one of them into it.”

“I’ve gotta call Lynn and warn her.”

“Put in a word about warning Mister All-nighter, while you’re at it. You have told her, haven’t you?”

“I’ll … get around to it.”

“Oh, you and your hormones!”

“No, I will. Just need to find the right time, that’s all.”

“Well, go give her a ring then. I mean, phone, you understand. I’ll be sure to save some food for you. By the way, where is the food? Maybe I should go plug in the microwave for them, if that’s what’s holding things up.”

Well, I chunked the thingamajig in a trash can, told the maitre’d I’d be back, and headed over to the Duck to use my cell phone to call Lynn.

I’d already filled her in earlier on the two dodo’s who’d waylaid us at Camp Moore. Now, I had to let her know there was a turncoat in the shop.

°

BACK IN THE Duck and with the phone to my ear, I informed Lynn regarding the extra changes in our route, then laid out my

suspicions regarding that extra-cutesy tease at North Brothers.

She then asked me, “Chris, are you sure about this?”

“To tell the truth, I’m not,” I replied. “But it did seem kind of funny, her being out there. And there was that smudge on her chin.”

“Well, she’s only been working here for, what, about a couple of years. Vent hired her as a bookkeeper, though I couldn’t see why. She didn’t have any real schooling to speak of.”

“Maybe that’s where you should start. I remember Daddy trying to get me to do the books, and he kept saying something about needing someone to take care of certain things for the family’s sake.”

“I’d have to look at the accounts myself, while they’re not around.”

“Go tonight after Vent closes up. Get Mason Hampton to let you in. Tell him I’ll owe him one.”

°

WHEN I GOT BACK to the restaurant, Sweedee was already digging into a plate of linguine topped with part of a rib-eye. The other half of the steak was left on a plate near my chair.

“You nearly missed out, North,” she said. “Oh, by the way, I already said the blessing for you, so you can go ahead and chow down if you like.”

“You said the, uh … what was it?”

Sweedee stopped chewing and was staring at me. “You mean you’ve never … oh, that’s right. You’re still in grade school. Anyway, you’re covered now.”

Trying to wrap my head around that one left me three inches shy of a complete idea. So, I just wrote off the three inches. “Well, thanks for the, uh … whatever it was. How’s the linguine?”

“Kind of dull,” she said, looking down at it. “Could use a little ketchup,” which she proceeded to apply. “So, kid, did you man-up

and tell her?"

"I told her about Darla, yeah."

"I mean …"

"I know what you mean. It's not that easy."

"Listen, kid … Aah! Runaway!" A bite of her steak had dropped on the floor. Sweedee reached down, stabbed it with her fork and popped it in her mouth. "Got it! Look, if she was naive enough to get hitched to Junior, she oughta be woman-enough by now to take the consequences. You're playing her too soft. I mean, if you really wanted her yourself, there shouldn't be such a problem."

"What makes you think I want … that I'm interested in Lynn … in that way?"

"Hey, I'm not trying to tell you to steal your brother's wife. That'd go against the book. Remember Herod? So, don't go chopping off the preacher's head just because you're sweet on the sweet one. Just wait for the divorce."

"As much of a rat my big brother is, I couldn't go doing that to Lynn. I think she still cares about him … in her own strange way, that is."

"Well, tell her and give her a chance to prove herself."

"Just let me handle it in my own good time."

"Fine with me. Where're we headed next?"

After taking a bite of my piece of steak, which wasn't half bad, I said, "I think it's time we start driving east again. We can head over to Hattiesburg, then up to Meridian. That should give us a straight shot to Birmingham where I'd like to lay over for the night before taking the last leg to Atlanta."

"Well, I've already got dibs on the bed. Just make sure we sack up some of this grub for supper. And throw in a few danishes and stuff, too. I've already ordered two or three flavors of pie. There's the dessert menu. You can pick out your own poison."

17

Hanna

Wow, Babe! That ice cream was amazing, I thought when Mister Jordan said something, I'd only get to have just those pieces of a banana. But then they put three big scoops on it, with chocolate syrup and whippy cream and nuts and cherries. The banana wasn't too bad either, especially since I didn't have to peel it. Mama was a little mad, 'cause I was getting dessert before dinner. But that one was dinner enough. I could eat one of those all the time. Well, not all the time. That'd be too fat'nin' and all. Mama would have to buy all new clothes for me then. Can't afford to do that on this trip.

This eating place is sure busy. Mama was on the phone for quite a while with that nice Missus North, while we were driving up here. Bet they were worried Sweedee might've given them the slip. But I have a hunch we're getting close, though Mama's still thinking Sweedee might still get mean and nasty if we showed up too quick.

"I don't know, Clese," she's saying, sitting across from me with a salad and a diet cola. "I'm worried for Hanna's sake now. If those two thugs they mentioned were really after them, things could get hot pretty quick if the rest catch up."

"I'm more concerned about who this boss of theirs is," Mister Jordan says, sipping from a cup of coffee and starting to bite into a

sandwich. “And who might’ve put that tracking device on their engine. Could’ve been somebody on the inside, which really complicates things. Anyway, she didn’t give you any clue as to which way the North guy’s headed, did she?”

“All he told her was that he’s staying clear of the interstates and sticking to the two-lanes. What does the map show?”

“Well, the only two ways I can figure is either they’re going on to Jackson or else heading east toward Hattiesburg. Either way …”

East!

I got their attention, Babe. They’re looking at me kind of dumb-like, though.

“Okay, little lady. What makes you think east then?”

‘Cause if his name is North, then that way they can fool the bad guys into thinking they’re going north, when they’re really going east. Anyway, Sweedee might think it nicer to visit Hattie instead of Jack, since they’re both girls and can relate.

Boy, Babe! They must think I’m telling a joke, laughing like they are. Grown-ups just don’t know how a kid can be serious sometimes.

“Honey, your logic just astounds me more and more.”

“I don’t know, Allie,” Mister Jordan’s saying. “Seems this case keeps getting crazier and crazier all the time. We’ll probably need to trust our instincts a little more than our logic from here on out. Still, it’s important to keep a professional attitude to stay ahead of the game.”

“Oh, of course” Mama’s agreeing. “Nothing beats good old detective work and following proper procedures. Speaking of which, shouldn’t we get going if we want to keep up with them?”

“Depends on whether they’re ahead of us or not. Either way, I need to pick up a better map. This one’s so worn and faded. Had it for years. I saw a supermarket near the turn-off to 98.”

Babe, looks like we’ve got a ton of homework to do, if we want to keep up with this private eye work. There goes Mister Jordan using another weird word, “it stinks.” That one’s got me baffled.

Does it mean we've got to go look for things by how bad they smell? That's gonna be a tough one, especially if Sweedee's using perfume. Sure wish you were a dog, Babe. We could use you to track'em then, if there's a smell to be found.

°

WHILE MISTER JORDAN goes into that store and Mama's using her pooter, we've got to stand look out.

Well, that's really something. Look over there, Babe. It's one of those trailers without a truck. You see, it doesn't need a truck. The thing pulls itself. And that trailer's a big one, too. There's some sort of a bird on the side that looks like you, Babe, but flying. And I can just make out some blue paint on the back, but I can't tell what alpha-bit it's using. Maybe it's like when someone gets married and their friends write "just married" on their car. Only this one's got no cans dragging, so must be something else it says, like, "just cruising." Must be nice, living on the road like that. Wonder if Mister Jordan can ask his boss for one, since it seems like we're going to be living on the road for quite a while. Me, I wouldn't mind it so much, 'specially if it had a bathroom. Wouldn't be worth living in without one and having to stop all the time.

18

Sweedee

1:17 PM FRI

Yeah, Ruby, the kid made a fuss about it. But I wouldn't mind sprucing up the place a bit, you know? Especially since we're going to be living in that dump-on-wheels for a while. Know what I mean? So, I made him pull up to this grocery store for a little stocking up on craft supplies. Besides, it'd give me something constructive to do for a change, instead of watching stupid boring TV all the time. I thought I'd get a few decorative items and do some, you know, decorating … you know? Well, here I am in the store and figured I'd start with the toy aisle and work my way around.

Oh, look, Ruby! Party decorations. And decals. Ah, and a paint set! We're getting ready to get creative here. It'll be my own debut into the art world. And to think, my work, on exhibit for the whole world to see, driving down the highway. I'll show those idiots at Emmanuel how real art is suppose to be done.

1:29 PM FRI

Ruby, I think I'm in heaven. The store's got it's own bakery, and

they've got cakes and pies and cookies galore. Ah, doughnuts! Gotta stock up. One … no, two dozen … no, make it three. Don't know how long we'll be on the road till we get there. Okay, we're done. Where's that card of his. Could've sworn I put it in my pocket. Maybe …

"Mama, I want something besides chocolate."

"Well, it's your birthday after all. Tell the lady what flavor icing you want on your cake."

Aw, she's such a cute little thing. And it's her birthday, too. I wouldn't remember mine for all the coffee in Brazil. Vent threw me one a few months ago, just for the fun of it. Sweetest thing! Wish he could've … no, I'm not going there. I've gotta let it go. He's not coming back. Suck it up, Sweedee! Still …

"I want blue frosting, 'cause blue's my favorite color."

Wow, the kid has good taste, too. I'd have made you a cake, too, Ruby honey, except I never learned how to cook. Was too caught up in my schooling and career back then, just grabbing whatever take-out I could afford. I really would've tried making you one, though, except … well, no sense bothering to learn. I mean, since you never even made your first birth… Aargh! Stop it, Sweedee. Stop letting it get to you. Just hold it in. Deep breaths. That's it. Let it go. There. Feel better already.

"Mama, I want lots of candles on it, too."

"But you're only five now. You'll get more as you get older. I promise."

Suck it up, Sweedee. Man, I've got to get away from here before I lose it.

1:45 PM FRI

Ruby, I don't know where people's brains are anymore these days. I mean, take this woman over here, talking to herself. I mean, I do it, too, but I have my reasons. And there's you, of course.

Rats! She's coming this way, and she's got one of those walkie-

talkies stuck to her ear. It looks like she's wanting to get me in on the deal, too. Gotta figure a way to …

"Hold on, honey. Hi there! You'll never guess it. I'm talking to my daughter, all the way from Hawaii. Can you believe it?"

Yeah, that's … something, I guess.

"What, honey? Oh, I'm just talking to some lady in the store. Say girl, who are you talking to? I saw you with your little … thingy there."

Oh, this thing? Just my dead kid, that's all.

"Oh, is that so? … oh! Uh, that's, uh … nice to hear. Well, then… (giggling) Nice to have met you … *(whispering)* Honey, some of the people in here are really strange, I swear …"

She's scurrying away now. Whew! Must've been how I smelled or something? Lady, it's not catching! Some people, let me tell you. So what, if her kid went to freaking Hawaii? Mine went to … a much better place than that. Let me tell you …

Aah! Sweedee, you're doing it again! Stop it! Stop it!

1:52 PM FRI

Okay. Let's see. Have I got everything …?

Uh, oh! Sorry, baby, I may have to cut things short. Looks like I'm being tailed. There's this big Black guy in a shirt and tie who's eyeing me from over there. Yep, I can smell a cop from a block away. Better get things wrapped up and outta here, before he starts questioning my dress. What, a gal can't go out in public in her best clothes anymore? Is there a law against wearing something comfortable? I tell you, cops these days. They oughta go after the real trash instead of bothering regular people who are just trying to get by. I had to deal with plenty of that kind of harassment back on the street.

Yeah, he's trying to act real undercover smooth cool over there. Here, here's a lane that's empty. Just pile my stuff on the counter, just pretend I'm a normal customer, just ignore the fact that he's

still looking … this … way … Nope, don't look, Sweedee.

"Ma'am, that'll be 55.92. You paying with card or cash?"

"How's this one?"

"Ooh! Yes, ma'am! That card will do just fine, Missus, uh … North, is it? Let me just ring you up … and there you go. You have a blessed day now. Thanks for shopping with us."

Yeah, thanks for the no-hazzle check out. Whew! Got through that one quick enough. Didn't realize what an adventure going into a store would be.

Yep, just get these things on out to the parking lot and on board and off we'll skedaddle. Right, I'm leaving the fuzz in the dust back there for sure—along with that loony gal and her walkie-talkie. None of them should be able to catch up now, what with those other people between us. Hope the kid's got the engine running.

19

Chris

Among its various amenities, turned out the Duck even sported a bathtub. A bathtub, mind you! And a decent sized one at that. I really hadn't had time to check out everything Daddy had done with the place. So, while Sweedee was gone to do a little shopping at a supermarket in McComb, I grabbed ol' Judy and decided to try out the tub at least, for old time's sake. The acoustics were not as great as in a real bathroom, but it served the purpose nonetheless.

The inside of my wallet, being most of the time bare of anything resembling cash, held folded pieces of paper with song ideas. I pulled out one such and gave it a little whirl:

You can build me your castles by the sea
I don't know no place I'd rather be
I'd take any spell that you can weave
If you'd just give me one more reason to believe

Yeah, needed some tweaking. I set that one aside and gave a run to that other song idea I'd begun back at the Baton Rouge Hilton:

Somewhere over yonder
Just one more mile to go …

Not much there to work with, so I added a couple of lines off the stick:

Somewhere over yonder
Somewhere … over there (I guess)
Up one hill then up (or maybe "down") another
There's just one more mile to go doo doo dah dah …?

I thought, what rhymed with "there". Care? Dare? Chair? I mean, where was "there" if anywhere? Nowhere, I guessed. Or what I didn't know, rather. Just one more time with it:

There's just one more mile to go
But … we don't know where

Hm, not bad! Kind of catchy. I even got a nice beat going with a "dum-dah-dah dum-dah-dah dum …" I figured I had a good one there. I wanted to keep working on it, but my mind starting drifting elsewhere. Sitting in an empty tub and contemplating life can do that sometimes.

One thing that had been weighing on my conscience ever since leaving Baton Rouge was Daddy and how he'd gone. Back in that tub at Twin Cedars, I was reminded of how he'd once taken off in his boat, leaving us family behind. Then, to *really* go for good, like he'd done … Perhaps I could've sympathized with Sweedee even, her being left behind and all alone on the streets—whenever *that* had happened to her. I even remembered her saying how I could've just left her on a street corner somewhere, if I'd wanted—not that I would've actually done such a thing. As far as my feelings about her being with Daddy, I'd pretty much gotten over that. I was now more into wondering about where Sweedee herself would end up, or where she might go after we'd completed the job. Did she have family in Atlanta? Would they still be there after all those years?

Somewhere over yonder
Somewhere over there
Up that hill then down the other
There's just one more mile to go
But we don't know where …

It was kind of like we were in the same boat actually. Or the same tub? Ugh! Scratch that thought. I meant, I had my rinky-dink trailer back in Birmingham. But there seemed nowhere for her to settle down. I figured for the both of us, neither one knew how or where life would end anyway. That is, where the road would end, if ever. But it was sure to end somewhere, just as it had done for Daddy. But would either of us have ever found a place we could call our own? Maybe the only home either of us would ever know, I felt, was the road itself. Yeah, the never-ending road. Not a bad place to be stranded, unless you were outta gas or had a flat. Gotta keep going, gotta keep moving. One more mile to go, and then …?

"The Neverending Road," I penned on that slip of paper and shoved it back in my wallet.

The tub had a mirror mounted on the side wall. I was looking at myself and seeing myself, as through a window, from the outside. That's the way I'd come to see myself: outside, looking in.

For some people, seeing themselves and everything they own as thoroughly documented makes them feel like they belong. They'd never have to view themselves as strangers any longer, especially after finding their name or likeness plastered on some piece of paper. Documentation gave them identity, made them somebody, proved their existence.

For others, such as myself or Sweedee even, there was always that feeling that we didn't belong, didn't recognize ourselves in a mirror even. Seeing my name in print somewhere would've just made me more uncomfortable with myself, isolated, associated with someone I'd never even met before. I was looking at that dude in the mirror then and wondering, "Who are you?"

Yeah, I had a gold card which, every time I whipped it out, made me seem like someone special, especially in the eyes of those who might've profited by catering to my needs and wants. But could I have made such an impression on my own? Could I have even met a woman and been seen in her eyes as someone capable of supporting a wife and kids, and on a roadie's seasonal salary at that? It'd mean getting a regular job, no doubt, which was not my ideal gig, you understand. I liked the idea of just heading down the road, that "freedom of the road" nonsense I'd been squawking about. But without that gold card in my pocket, no telling where I'd end up or how I'd get there.

What we long for is a place we've never been
What we look for is a place we'll never go
We may never find the place we can call our own
But we're always at home just driving along this never-ending road.

Sitting in that tub, I just snatched that one out of thin air. The tub itself was empty, after all, but wouldn't that provide room enough for all sorts of endless possibilities? Never knew what could be found in an empty tub, did you?

Suddenly, the tub's curtain got drawn back, and there stood Sweedee, a puffer hanging from her lips and a few bags dangling from her hands. "Hey, kid! You in …? Oh, there you are. Just checking. So, you always bathe without water? I mean, the air's nice and clean in here, but it doesn't do as good a job as, you know, water."

"I just like the privacy," I rejoined, "when I can get it. Helps me think."

"Hm! Your party then. How about we boogie. This town's making me nervous." She then drew the curtain shut and went off mumbling to herself back into the sleep area.

I put away ol' Judy and got myself back in the saddle. We still

had Hattiesburg to get past. I set the GPS and pulled onto highway 98, still singing to myself:

Somewhere over yonder
Somewhere over there …

20

Chris

Though technically not an "interstate"—something with which I couldn't have argued against Sweedee's aversions, if I'd wanted to—highway 98 did consist of four lanes: two headed back west and two running toward the east. We, of course, were bound eastward at the moment, leaving McComb behind and entering some wide-open country—well, the highway's corridor was pretty wide enough, at least. House trailers were the norm for most residences out that way. There was also a large bottling plant for a major soft drink brand, one which I won't mention since my own drink-of-choice, Orange Nehi, happened to be a competitor. I kept a big-gulp ice-filled cup of it in the cup holder while handling the steering wheel.

The main waterway we crossed was Bogue Chitto River which wound its way back down into Louisiana, into territory once settled by my North family forbears. They had been pioneers from way back, with a tradition for cross-country trekking which I felt obliged to uphold. In fact, historically, highway 98 roughly followed the old trail used by the original settlers of this area, so you could say I was retracing my ancestors' footsteps—well, their wagon-wheel ruts, rather.

After the river, the highway took a dive down toward Tylertown

before climbing back up to Columbia. A lot of forested country out that way, and a lot of rolling hills from the tops of which you could scout the landscape for quite a distance. We were cruising along at a nice clip, and I figured we'd make Hattiesburg in perhaps another hour before heading from there up to Meridian.

Apparently, Sweedee had retreated to somewhere in the back, hanging out there for quite a spell, actually. For some reason, she was real anxious earlier about us getting back on the road, which had sounded fine with me. I wanted to get this trip over and done with as soon as could and get my life, such as it was, back on track back there in Birmingham.

At some point past Tylertown, and without a word, Sweedee appeared up front, swished right by me in that blue robe of hers, and settled into the passenger seat across the way.

"Well, I'll be," I said, after eyeing her for a bit.

"You'll be what, a nosy turd?" she rejoined.

"I thought you said steerage was for crew only. What, Miss First-Class decided to come see how the other half lives?"

"Hey, I'm not above stepping down a notch or two every now and then. Living on the streets taught me that. It's just that I don't sell myself short, like most of those nine-to-five day-jobbers do. You've gotta live a little, give yourself the good things while you can. Here? I'm just taking a break, that's all."

As usual, she extracted a cigarette from the pack with her lips, chewed off and spit out the butt, then proceeded to light up.

"I've been meaning to ask for some time," I persisted, "but why do you keep doing that when you could try another brand that already comes without filters?"

Sweedee let loose a puff of smoke and looked at the thing, then hard at me. "Well, for your info, kiddo, I like mine full strength. None of that filtered crap for me. Give it to me straight, know what I mean? And what do you mean, another brand? You're saying someone makes them like that?"

"Well, yeah. They've been on the market for quite a while now."

“You’re pulling my leg, North. And I don’t like it when people do that. Understand?”

“No, honest. You can get them by the carton even. I’ve known dudes who smoked nothing but, and drank their coffee solid black even, which kind of turned my stomach, of course. But, hey …”

She then started laughing. “This I gotta see. So, go get me some and let me try them out.”

“What, now?”

“Yeah. Pull over somewhere. I’ve gotta see this. Save me on my dental bill, if it’s for real.”

Well, at the time we were quite a ways out, with nothing in sight. The GPS showed a truck stop near Kokomo coming up. I figured that would be as good a place as any, to show her how I wasn’t so dumb as she thought. You know, do something nice for the woman. At least, that’s how I saw it as being.

°

I SHIFTED the Duck over to a turn lane bending into a side road. Within the other corner, in the midst of a pretty good sized asphalt lot, stood a large store flanked by spacious pumping stations for both regular and diesel fill-ups. Rigs were lined up along the back area and ready with various loads to haul, while cars and pickups sat backed up against the front curb waiting for later retrieval by commuters. A scattering of small house trailers formed a close community behind the lot. All was well and good for those not yet cut loose from their day-jobs.

The big sign over the store’s entrance read, “Reagan’s Corner.” Just your typical country hub in the middle of nowhere, servicing needs which would’ve required traveling an extra 50 miles or so to satisfy. I was hoping they’d have in stock the very item I was after —rather, what Sweedee was craving and chomping at the bit for— filterless full-strength puffers, and by the carton, too, to keep her needs satisfied for the remainder of the trip.

After pulling in, I swung the Duck around the back and parked on the far side, pointing us toward the highway.

"Take your time, North," Sweedee hollered. "I'm going to sit outside and get some sun."

The inside of the store itself wasn't all that crowded. Back then, stores didn't keep the cigarettes behind the counter like they do now, but displayed them on a rack where you could help yourself. I walked over and scanned the numerous brands until I spotted just one carton of the filterless variety way up top. Not having much height on me, I had to stretch pretty good to get my fingertips on the carton's end and lift it out a bit. Still, it was hard going extracting that thing from the stack. In the midst of my struggle, I heard a woman's voice from behind me. There was something about it that, I don't know, was resonating in a certain auspicious way inside my being, almost like the hum from the strumming of the strings did deep down inside the body of ol' Judy, my guitar. I'm talking a honey-sweet hum, deep and smooth.

"Those'll give you lung cancer, you know," the woman said.

I was in such a posture, with both my right arm and body extended, that I couldn't turn right away and catch the woman's face. But at the sound of her voice and its admonishing tone, a vague image of sorts welled up from the depths of memory and poured forth into a vivid scene from childhood.

It had been a sunless November afternoon, when a tinier version of myself had gone out into our backyard and, taking the blank sky for a sheet of paper and letting the overhead oak branches serve for staff lines, made the thin splattering of their leaves into a random pattern of quarter-notes. Being then no more than four or five, it didn't matter that I had no idea what staff lines or quarter-notes were. After composing that first musical masterpiece of mine, I fell backward into a symphonic heap of leaves gathered at my feet. That dazzling premiere then got interrupted by a round of percussive noises stemming from the side gate being swung and bounced against the board fence. The wisp of a white dress under a gray

overcoat stood out. The small figure of a girl who I'd never seen before then just as suddenly disappeared, something I interpreted as an invitation to go off after her. With jacket half-clinging and sneakers unlaced, I set forth upon my debut tour of the outside world.

Where Whitman Drive met Sherwood Forest, her small figure turned the corner and dashed forth. I rounded that corner, too, and came to where the sidewalk ended at a drainage canal over which Sherwood crossed by a bridge. On the opposite side, an elementary school stood with a playground overrun with children running and jumping and catching and riding high the long-chained swings and daring the high shiny slides. And there ran the small girl among them, that backyard intruder who had interrupted my earlier compositional efforts.

I faced a chain-linked fence which kept me from tumbling headlong into the weedy depths of the canal. Traffic on the bridge remained quite active. And there flowed that thread of water down below which looked shallow enough. Everything was calling for this little dude to put out of mind all fear of drowning or getting his socks wet or staining his breeches with mud. No obstacle remained against the wanderlust of my pursuit but the height and sheerness of the fence.

I clawed the angled wire with those tiny fingers, while inserting the tips of my tenny's through each diamond-shaped opening. Grabbing hold of the top supporting bar, I clung there, frozen stiff by the screeching of tires and blaring of horns and such shouting as should never have entered a small boy's ears. This early break for freedom and wild chase were thus overtaken by a billowing voice from behind.

"Chris! Christopher North! Get your little butt down off that fence, boy, and come over here!"

I dropped to the ground, turned and faced the astonished expression on my daddy's face.

"Where the hell did you think you were going, boy?" he

growled. “Imagine the kind of grief your Mama would’ve gone through, if she’d seen me fishing your lifeless body out of that canal. You get in this truck right now, you hear me?”

If I’d learned anything from that earlier episode of rambling, it was to hold onto whatever was at hand and keep posing the question, “What is real? What can I still lay hold of and know without a doubt that this is real?” Whether it were my little hands clinging to that chain-linked fence back there on Sherwood or my current fingers taking hold of a carton of cigarettes in that roadside store, there remained little chance of either occurrence being mistaken for a dream. But turning to face the one who’d just spoken to me, and visualizing once more that wisp of a white dress scurrying down the street and across the playground, my grasp on where I was and what I was doing there took such a tumble, when the ground finally did give way.

When I turned around this time, no scolding figure there, but a soft glowing face framed by short wavy blonde hair. Above the pert lips from which that voice had emanated, there shined eyes of blue as clear as cool water. I mean, they looked blue at first, though upon better inspection they might’ve been a shade of gray. But for that instant, walking the tightrope between what I remembered about “blue” and what I’d hoped for in her eyes, they could’ve stayed blue forever.

Fumbling with the carton, I said, “Oh, um, you see, these are not for me. A friend of mine sent me in here.”

“Well, if that’s the case,” she replied, “you might advise your friend to quit while he can still breathe deep.”

“Actually, it’s a she. And I don’t think I could convince her one way or the other.”

“Oh, for your sake she should. I mean, you being her boyfriend and all.”

I laughed. “Far from it. I mean, definitely not with her. She’s just … an old friend of the family.”

“You’re being awfully nice to her, killing her with such kindness.

Oops! Sorry about the pun. Anyway, I'd be more inclined to help her quit, if I were you."

"I'll give it a try. Though she is a bit stubborn in her ways."

"Now, I'm not saying I'd deny someone their last cigarette—that is, even if they were dying of cancer. I was just, you know …"

"Being nice yourself?"

"Hm, was I? Anyway, I'll have you know I can be just as stubborn as your friend, the smoker, though I try to do a better job of taking care of my lungs."

"I bet they're beautiful lungs, too … uh, I mean, healthy. Healthy lungs."

"You're darn right. But … thanks for the compliment. Well, I … I need to be going now. Think about what I said, okay?"

"Sure thing."

She then smiled, blinked her eyes—I think she bounced a little, as well—before turning away. She was dressed in a dark pants suit, the backside of which wasn't half bad, either. Now, she didn't look back, which was the usual sign that a chick was interested in a dude. Still, she didn't hurry away, either, which might have indicated a slight desire to take another look, if she'd dared. I mean, wouldn't you think? Though, who was I kidding? She was probably just wondering if she had enough for whatever she'd planned on buying. Yeah, that could've been it. What were this dude's lingering fantasies but leaves piled on the ground or scattered on the wind?

•

BACK ON THE far side of the Duck, I found Sweedee sitting in her lawn chair, using that umbrella of hers for shade, and smoking away.

"Hey, what do you think?" she asked, pointing toward that side of the Duck.

I looked. Plastered to the outer wall were decals of Santa and his elves, Christmas trees, American flags, various flowers and words

like LOVE and PEACE and HOME.

"Wow! The Duck's never looked … spiffier. Not bad."

"Don't mention it." She then folded up the umbrella and chair and hobbled up and in through the door.

After getting inside—that door still making those frog-like sounds—I laid the carton on the dash, cleaned up the counter a bit—coffee grounds, cigarette butts, doughnut crumbs—hauled the trash to a dumpster, then took to the driver's seat once again.

Sweedee plopped back down on the passenger side, tore open the carton, fished out a pack, ripped that open and gasped. It wasn't two seconds, and she had one lit and smoking up the cab area.

I asked her, "Have you ever, uh, thought about quitting?"

She blew a thick wad and mumbled, "Quitting?"

"Yeah. Try some of the things they've got now, like patches, gum, step programs. Things like that. Maybe …"

"Quitting, huh?"

"You oughta really consider it. I mean, for your lungs' sake."

"Sorry, North," Sweedee said, with a frown and a head-shake. "I'm not a quitter."

"But why go on torturing yourself?"

"Because it's the real thing," she replied, pointing that cigarette at me. "Not like any of those pacifiers you mentioned, either. The real deal. Everything in this life is crap, kid, and you've got to plow through it at full throttle if you want to get to the other side."

"But what's so special about getting to the other side that's worth all that misery?"

"People who didn't quit. Take Napoleon, for instance. After he'd whipped their butts, they lassoed him and stuck him on some island. And what did he do? Sit back and retire? No. He came back again and whipped the whole lot and then-some."

"Okay, okay. I was just a little … concerned, that's all. I mean, you're not getting any younger."

"And neither are you, sipping on that sugar water like you do. It'll rot out your teeth. By the way, what got you so concerned

about old Sweedee's lungs?" She was eyeing me close now. "Someone say something to you? Huh! Had to have been a woman. You men and your hormones. Bet she was a pretty one, too."

"Yeah, in a way."

"Hello! Earth to North! Throttle this sucker and let's get on our way. And stop daydreaming … Pfft! Men!"

21

Hanna

Boy, I slept a lot, didn't I, Babe? It must've been that banana's split that did it. Wow, I could maybe sleep a little longer, if I weren't on the job. I wonder when you get time off from this private eye work to do anything. It's really no fun working all the time. Mister Jordan has his boat he visits when he's off. Mama does the laundry or reads a book or a magazine when she's off. I'd go to the playground and hang out with the other kids. But they're all the way back home, so I'll just have to sit here and close my eyes for a little bit longer. Just a little longer. Let me keep sitting here and listening to the grown-ups talk.

"What's she doing?" That's Mister Jordan.

"Napping," Mama says. "Guess that's about all she can do on this trip. Probably misses her friends. Been nice if there were another to keep her company, play games with, that kind of thing."

"Well, we should be back in Atlanta by tomorrow. We can drop her off at your mama's before reporting to the director."

"I'm wondering, Clese. If we were to catch up with them, I mean, what are we suppose to do? Turn the woman in? That's the right thing to do, isn't it?"

"Actually, it'd be best if we didn't make contact at all. I have a former colleague who's a detective with the Birmingham city police.

When we're getting close, I'll give him a call and let him handle it. Till then, we just keep our distance and keep a watch on them. Besides, we can't really do anything, not with a child on board. The director would scrape me and you over the coals, if we were to put her in any kind of danger."

"That's true. And you'd have my mother to contend with, as well. Although technically, my adopted mother."

"Adopted? Who told you …?"

"She did, the other day when I was getting packed. Believe me, it was a shock. But I'd always wondered why they had no other children, and why she couldn't find my birth certificate when I needed it for joining the force. I'll admit, I felt a bit … lost after learning the truth. I mean, who am I really? She said she didn't know who my real parents were. Just that my mother had abandoned me as a baby, and the only man I knew as my father took enough pity on a poor lost child to make it his own. I even wonder if my real name is Alyssa, or did they just make that one up."

"Allie, you are who you are, a fine young woman with a precious daughter. You're her mother. That should be enough."

"But who was *my* mother? What kind of person leaves her child and runs off? And was she the one who gave me my name? Matter of fact, who gave you your name, Clese?"

"My grandmother. See, in our family, when a child was born, they phoned up Grandma Jordan and asked what book she was reading from the Bible. At that time, she was in the book of Ecclesiastes. But that one was a bit of a mouthful for my daddy, so he took to calling me Clese. That was how it was. I remember a cousin once, being named Jeremiah."

"Well, Jeremiah's not a bad name."

"For a girl? When she was old enough, and got tired of the other kids singing, 'Jeremiah was a bullfrog!' she cried and cried until they shortened it to Miah."

"It's kind of terrible how people get named without their

permission. Take this Feathers woman. Who decided to start calling her Sweedee instead of Susan?"

"Well, she was on the street for quite a long stretch. Some of the ones who work the streets are not the kindest sort. Maybe one of them gave it to her to make her fit in."

"Or to give her a hard time. I know it's against policy, but I have to sympathize with her, being cut off from the world, with nothing to connect her with it … although, I do have Hanna. That's my pretty little anchor. But for this Sweedee woman, …"

You hear that, Babe? Sweedee must be a mighty lonesome woman, with no one to be her anchor. And Mama. What did she mean? Am I uh-doppit too? Grandma Carol is not my grandma? I'm starting to feel lonesome myself, if it weren't for you, Babe, and Mama, and Mister Jordan. We've got to stick together, if we don't want to end up on the street with those mean people who picked on Sweedee.

"Come on, Clese," Mama's saying. "You seem to know more about her than anyone. Is there someone she can call, after all of this is over?"

"I don't … I mean, I wouldn't … Let's just put that one on hold, shall we? It looks like we'll be needing some gas before long."

"Think we have enough to make it to the next town? That's … Columbia, right?"

"I think I see something coming up."

"Great. While you fill up, I'll pop in and get some things for Hanna to munch on. All she's had so far was that ice cream you bought her."

°

BOY, Babe! My legs are something sore, and I didn't even do anything with them. It's good to get some fresh air, as well, although with all those big trucks coming and going here it's not as fresh as I would want it. And my ears have really opened up with

all these sounds of people and cars and big trucks and cars on the road and trucks honking at each other.

"Now, honey," Mama's telling me, "stay near the car. We'll only be here for a few minutes."

She's gone into the store now. Wonder where all these people come from and where they're going. They can't just stay around here all the time—although I've heard the men who drive the trucks sleep in them wherever they can. Must be kind of hard sleeping in the seat like that. They've got to have some place where they can stretch their legs inside that big old truck of theirs. Maybe in the trailer there's a bed or something. Not as much room as we saw in that trailer back a ways. Speaking of which, there's one over there, Babe. I wonder if it's the same one or a different one that looks just like it. While Mister Jordan's busy pumping the gas, we'll just walk over and check.

Babe, I think it is the same one, because there's that same bird flying on the side. Wonder what's on the other side. Uh, oh! There's a woman sitting over there, holding an un-brillo. And it's not even raining. She might not like us peaking around their trailer. Maybe we oughta …

"Hey! Come here."

Oh no, Babe! She's calling to us. I'll just pretend we're locals and say like howdy and gotta get back home and all.

"Come here." She's waving to us now. She looks like she just got up from a nap herself, all dressed for it with her jammies and slippers. Oh, how cute! Fuzzy slippers. They must feel nice. Let's be nice, as well.

Ma'am?

"I want you to take a look and tell me what you think. Now, be honest now."

What …? Oh, that. You decorated your trailer for criss-mus. But that's not until December. Still, it's kind of cute. Oh, and flowers, too.

"Cute? Kid, it's art. It's not suppose to be cute. It's suppose to speak to your inner soul. Doesn't it say something to you that's

uplifting and inspiring? A testament to humanity and all that?"

I just think it's cute, that's all. Especially the way you have Santa and his rain-gear chasing after the flying bird.

"Well, then. What does your friend there think of it?"

Oh, Babe. He thinks it's cute, too. He don't know much about art or anybody by that name. He's just a ping-oo-win.

"A penguin, huh? Looks more like a duck to me. What's he doing down here instead of up at the North Pole?"

Babe doesn't know how to fly. So he stays with me. I promised him one day, when I'm grown up, I'll take him up north to see his folks.

"Up north, huh? I'm from up north, too. Ever heard of Pennsylvania?"

Pin-see …

"It's a state. Anyway, I'm just traveling for now. One day I'll fly back home myself. Maybe your friend can hitch a ride."

Oh, no. I couldn't lend Babe to a stranger. My mama would get mad.

"Well, fine then. I guess since you've given me your honest opinion, I'm done with you."

I hear Mister Jordan calling, "Hanna!" Better get back.

Oh, sorry. I've got to go back home now. They're calling me.

"Yeah, sure, kid. Nice of you to stop by. I don't get too many visitors. But you be safe. And mind your parents, too. Okay?"

Uh-huh. Bye now. Babe, say bye.

She's waving that smoking thing with her hand. Smoking's not good for you. That's what Mama says. Hope that lady understands.

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"SHE DID *what*?!" That's Mama, finding out from Mister Jordan how I went wandering around, like she told me not to, and talked with a strange woman, which she always told me not to. "Hanna Irene Babbitt! How many times have I told you, don't talk to strangers? It's a wonder you weren't kidnapped."

But Mama, she wasn't wanting me to take a nap, just look at her

stickers on the side of that …

"That's not the point. Just because someone wants you to look at something doesn't mean they mean well. Now, mind me from now on. Is that clear?"

Yes, Mama.

"Now then. I got you some nutra-bars and apple juice. Here. That should hold you till we can stop somewhere for supper."

Boy, Babe! A kid can't go anywhere without being told what to do. "Hanna, eat this. Hanna, drink this." And look. There's Mama with a bag of chocolate bars. Why do grown-ups get to snack on what they want? That lady back there could smoke all she wanted, too. I wonder when's the age you can start doing what you want without being told to. There must be some sort of law that says so. But what's the difference if I eat candy, which is bad for me, and a grown-up eats it and it's okay? And think, it's the grown-ups who make the laws. But then, maybe it's not a law but a story. The story of getting to tell other people what to do. I've got to work on that one. It'll be a best seller, I just know it. Especially with kids who want to know when they can.

"Okay, Clese," Mama's saying. "Ready when you are."

"Just a minute. I just want to check the map again before we start." Mister Jordan's got a big piece of paper spread across the car wheel.

Mama's looking at him and saying, "This highway's headed to Hattiesburg, right? What do you need a map for?"

"I'm just trying to look ahead, that's all. Give me a minute."

"Fine. I'll wait."

Mister Jordan seems kind of flustered about something. So is Mama. Boy, she's tearing into those chocolates like they're going out of state. She hasn't done that since Daddy left us. I remember it, because she acted kind of down for days. Wonder what's got her down now. Hope it's not my fault. I mean, it shouldn't be. Maybe she saw something in that store that reminded her of Daddy. That has to be it.

Oh, look. That trailer's leaving now. Hope that lady finished with her stickers and got them on there real good. 'Cause if it rains, they could come off. And there's something written on the back, like that one from before. Ooh, I couldn't make it out, Babe. It didn't look like "just cruising," like I thought before. Wonder what it said.

"Okay, let's go." Mister Jordan's done with the big paper now.

"What?" Mama's saying. "Just like that? You hardly had it opened for, what, two seconds?"

"Look, I was just trying to see when we might be approaching Birmingham. I'd say now it's another two maybe three hours away. We can stop there to eat, if that'll satisfy you."

"Fine by me."

Mister Jordan's making those breathing noises, like when he's uptight about something. "Look, Allie. I'm sorry I didn't keep a better eye on her while we were stopped. Okay?"

"Well, nothing happened, thank goodness. And I'm not blaming you anyway. I'm just … I don't know why I'm feeling so anxious right now. Maybe I need a nap myself."

"Munching on those chocolates won't help you much in that department."

"Shut up! I'm just in the mood for something chocolate, that's all. It helps me relax and think."

That's grown-ups for you, Babe. They get to take it easy all the time, while they get onto us kids for doing the same thing. "Hanna, no TV till you've cleaned you room. Hanna, no snacks till you've had your dinner." Maybe it has to do with eating things that they shouldn't … That's it! They must know that, if a kid eats bad stuff, we'll get smart and start doing our own thing. So, if a grown-up starts eating good stuff, they're easier to tell what to do. I think I'm onto something, Babe. We'll figure out this grown-up thing before you know it, and then make a lot of money when the story's written. When that happens, I should have enough to get you back to the North Pole. And maybe some left over to help Sweedee get

back to pin-see … pin-seal … pencil state or something. Wherever that is.

Come to think of it, where did that lady say she was from?

22

Sweedee

2:36 PM FRI

Ruby, the kid made this tub look so inviting that I had to fill it with water and soap suds and sink this old body into it. Did such great work on my art display out there, that I worked up quite a sweat, let me tell you.

So, off with the duds and into the suds! Brought a box of doughnuts along, as well.

That's life, you know, a gift from the Big Guy. Live it while you can, 'cause it won't be 'round for long. You see, in giving it, he means to see what you do with it. Know what I mean? If you do nothing, then he takes it back with nothing refunded. But if you do something with it, even something small but honest, then he gives it back to you with more besides. At least, that's how ol' Sweedee looks at it. Rather, I think the book has something to say along the same lines: "give and ye shall receive." It's like, losing a friend when you've had a big fight with them. If you've been forgiven by the Big Guy, why not forgive your friend? Then you get back what you lost. See? Now, if they were in the wrong, you've got to kick their butts first. Then, after they've got their heads on straight, forgive them. Simple. But you've gotta go back and look for what

was lost. ‘Cause if you never go back but keep delaying and delaying, then it’s no go, door’s shut, with no key to open it with. Found plenty a locked door in my day, let me tell you. When that happens, it gives you a punch in the gut if not a whack to the head.

Didn’t mean to sermonize there, but hope you got the point. I mean, if someone owes you a debt, and you’ve taken their blanky away that they cover themselves with, when night-time comes and its freezing outside, they’re gonna be sitting on the sidewalk crying and moaning, like, “Where’s my blanky? Cut me some slack! It’s cold out here!” Believe me, it was tough on the streets like that. You’re alone, with no one around wanting to help, either. That’s how your old mom felt that very first night. Yeah, got a story coming up. So, where’d I leave off? Oh, yeah. *The Saga of Susan.* Make this, “part deux,” since I got a few cream-filled croissants here making me feel kind of Frenchy.

To kick the can again, after Susie left that hospital—ran scared, rather—she ducked in and out of places. I mean, all she had on was that lousy gown showing her backside. Could’ve grabbed something a little warmer, but didn’t. She came to this alley way and saw a big cardboard box and figured, “must be warm in there.” Well, it was. Except someone was already living in it.

“What you doin’, bustin’ in my house?” a big voice hollered.

Susan said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t …,” then sat off to the side, hugging her knees and wondering what to do next.

Then, this big kinky-headed Black gal sticks her head out and says, “Where you from?”

“Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania? How you get this far south? Ain’t you got no sense, wandering away from home like that? … Say, you uh angel or something?”

Susan shook her head.

“No? Aah! Thought you might be one of them angels. Guess I’ll never get to see one now. Well, since you ain’t no angel, guess you can’t stay out there all night. But come on in anyways. Come on!

Don't need no dead White girl stinking up my front yard."

Susan crawled over and started to slip in.

"Wait a sec!" the woman said, catching her. "You snore?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, alright. But if I catch you snoring, I'm throwing you out. You hear?"

"I'll try not to."

"Then do try, sistuh. One thing I can't stand is somebody keeping me up with their's seesawin' wood all night long. There, you can have that spot in the corner."

Next morning, the woman saw that Susan had nothing on but that gown. So, she rummaged around the stuff piled inside the box and came up with some warmer duds for her, no matter how they smelled. Then it was breakfast time. The woman went and hopped inside a dumpster, was digging around in there, and came up with some trashy items.

"Looky there!" she said. "A bottle of ketchup with a little bit left in the bottom. And here's a squeeze bottle with a dab of honey. We just have to set it in the sun a bit, and it'll pour just fine. And here's a bag of moldy bread. We just scrape that off and smear some honey and ketchup on it and have ourselves a meal. Don't worry. I'll save a little for you, too."

She got their "breakfast" set up and had broke off a piece and handed it to Susan. Susan was set to bite into it—considering she'd not had anything since the day before—when the woman grabbed her hand and said, "Wait for the blessin', chile!" After she prayed over it—and a quick one at that—she let Susan dig in. That was probably the first time Susan had heard of the Big Guy, though she'd been taught a different name. The woman didn't care for the name Susan mentioned, saying, "You oughtin' not say that in front of him. He's the Big Guy, period. He don't like folks givin' him other names."

Then, after breakfast, the woman pulled out a cigarette and offered one to Susan.

“Sorry, I don’t smoke,” Susan said.

“Well, you better learn. There ain’t nothing else to do on the street but—that is, when you can get some. It helps wile away the hours, while you’re sitting and wondering when’s the next meal comin’ ‘round.”

“How can you afford these, when you can’t afford food?”

“There’re folks who treat smokin’ different from eatin’. ‘Round bars and such, where guys and gals are getting ready to, you know, do it, they just take a few puffs of their own then toss the rest out. Some days you can scrape up a full pack.”

So, that’s how your old mom got started. Now, don’t fuss. I can quit anytime I want. Really. Honest. And I don’t need the kid squawking about it, either. Wonder where he got the notion from anyway, considering it was him who suggested getting me the full-strength kind in the first place.

Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. Funny thing about that woman. She never asked Susan’s name, nor gave her own, till a few days later when she told her, “Hand me back my lighter, you … you … what’s your name again?”

“Susan.”

“Susan, huh? Kind of a wimpy name, if you ask me. I’ll have to think up a tougher one for you, if you’re gonna live here on the streets. Anyway, FYI, mine’s Babs. And don’t make fun of it, or out you go. Hear?”

“Okay … Thank you, Babs, for taking me in.”

“Don’t thank me. If you ask me, the Big Guy was watchin’ over ya. It’s him you oughta thank.”

Well, it took time and many an error, but Susan got the hang of living out there with Babs.

Now, you’re probably wondering why she didn’t go back to her apartment. Susan did bring it up one time, and Babs said, “You didn’t say nuthin’ about you had a place. Let’s go check it out.” But when they got there, someone else was living in it.

“It’s uh-fishul. You’s homeless, girl!”

Well, from then on, everyday, Babs wracked her brains, trying to come up with a new name for Susan. She tried Susie, Suza, Ethel—Susan had told her how someone misnamed her that once—Susie-Q, Saucy. But nothing seemed to stick.

Then, one day, while they were waiting in line for sandwiches being handed out by the Salvation Army, Susan spotted old Gus coming down the sidewalk. She tried hiding herself behind Babs, which got Babs kind of mad.

"What you so afeared for? Oh, him? Yeah, he keeps comin' down here and visiting the whores on the street. None of 'em likes him, though. But he always has plenty of cash to shell out. Don't know what he does, but they's must be paying him real good. *Easy-street*, I calls him. He don't look too bright to get a real job."

"He did something to me one time," Susan said.

"Did what? … Oh. You get pregnunt?"

"Uh-huh. But … she didn't live. In a way, he's responsible. But in a way, not. At least, that's what I figured. I wish I could make him feel the pain I felt."

Babs looked at Gus talking to one of the street walkers. "You let me set things up first." She went and talked with one of the others and got her to lure Gus down an alley. Babs and Susan hid behind a dumpster and waited. Just when the girl got his back turned, Babs upped and whacked him upside the head. Down went Gus. The girl complained, saying Babs should've waited till he'd paid his tab. Babs sent her on her way with a few dollars from Gus' wallet. Then, we just sat off to the side and smoked, figuring what we would do with him.

"Go on! You wants to do it, doesn't ya?"

Susan got up, went over, and kicked his side.

"Kick him in the butt!" Babs hollered.

Susan did. She even got the nerve to stomp him in the groin. Whenever he'd wake up, she figured, he'd feel it real good. Satisfied, she sat back down and puffed some more.

Susan started mumbling to herself, "Susan Edith. Sue Edie.

Suuueeee … Sweedee! I got it! You can call me Sweedee. I've done Sweedee'd that bastard."

"Yes, indeed!" Babs hollered. "Sweedee's your name now. Now, what we gonna do with him."

"What he did to me. Leave him naked as a jaybird."

"Girl, you serious?"

"Help me get his clothes off."

They then struggled with it, but finally left poor Gus lying there with nothing to cover him but that big ugly hairy chest of his. Sweedee wanted to stomp him in the you-know-whats one more time, but Babs forbade it.

"Once is enough, honey. The Big Guy don't like it if you overdoes things. Says so right there in the book."

"What book are you talking about?"

"What book? Why, girl, that's the Bible. Haven't you read your Bible before?"

Well, for the next few days, Babs gave Sweedee her schooling in the Bible. Let me tell you, there were things Sweedee as Susan had never been taught before. It really opened her mind, and her heart, too. She felt liberated, and told Babs so.

"Baby, there ain't no liberatin' until you's been baptized. Says so right here in the gospel of John. See? It's where the Big Guy's boy says you've gotta be born of water and spirit. You think you's ready for that?"

Sweedee felt like she was ready alright. At least, she thought she was ready. But you're never really ready for it till it's done. That night, they snuck downtown to where a big beautiful fountain was and waded in together. Babs said some words, then dunked old Sweedee under. Actually, she did that several times, each time hollering, "Praise Jesus!" Finally, after Sweedee thought she had almost been drowned, Babs grabbed her and hugged her—I mean, really hugged her—and hollered some more, "Girl, you's saved! You's saved! You's Sweedee for sure, 'cause the Big Guy's done named you hisself."

I tell you, Ruby, it was on that day—night, rather—that Sweedee felt like she'd been truly reborn, and that there was someone who truly loved her and would never let her down. And the Big Guy hasn't since … except that one time.

It happened one night. They were sleeping in Babs' box, when Babs started coughing like she'd been doing for a few days. She sat up, coughing something fierce.

"You alright?" Sweedee asked.

"No. I's got to get some air. You stay here. Don't come looking for me. Hear?"

Well, Babs stayed gone a long time that night. Sweedee couldn't help it. She got up and wandered up the alley to the street. There sat Babs against a storefront.

"Babs! Hey Babs, you alright?"

But she didn't say anything. Didn't move either.

Sweedee knelt down and shook her. That's when she knew. That's when she ran and hid behind the corner, terrified. A cop car came down the street and stopped, and the cops got out and went over to Babs. Soon, some other cop cars showed up. Sweedee just huddled in the darkness, watching. After they'd come and hauled Babs away, Sweedee went back to the box, laid down and cried herself to sleep.

Next day, coming back from using a port-a-potty at a construction site, she saw them loading her's and Babs' box in a garbage truck—well, not Babs' anymore, just Sweedee's. She yelled for them to stop, that that was her home, but they just stared at her and moved on. She gathered up what she could from what had fallen out, wrinkled magazines and such, and Babs' raggedy Bible, and went and sat on a bench. People walked passed, like she wasn't there. Just some woman with all this stuff crammed in her lap. Suddenly, she felt so alone. She even took to talking to herself about this or that. Who else could she talk to? The only friend she'd had in the world was gone.

Kids would come around, teasing her, staring at her in a weird

way.

"What's the matter?" she'd say back. "Haven't you ever seen a woman talking to herself? Now scram! You're disturbing my conversation."

They'd just laugh and call her names before wandering off.

But afterwards, she'd just pick up where she left off.

Sometimes, it'd get late in the day after a round of deep discussion, and Sweedee would start feeling really hungry. She would've checked the dumpsters but then remember it had been pickup day. So, she went and crawled under another cardboard box and fell asleep. I mean, if I had to go to sleep hungry, I had to go to sleep hungry. Nothing I could do about it.

Then, one time, suddenly she remembered something Babs had told her. It was like she heard her talking to old Sweedee right then: "You see, folks don't starve 'cause there's no food. They starve 'cause they're too dumb to know where to look. And that takes using what the Big Guy gave you: your head. If you don't, then you start feeling sorry for yourself. And when you do that, people start hating you, then you start hating you. Pretty soon, you get crazy notions like throwing yourself off a bridge or something."

From then on, Sweedee would stop and remember to use her head—and thank the Big Guy for giving her one. 'Cause you see, a lot of people don't have one. They don't even have sense enough to know where to get one. Meaning, going to the Big Guy and asking, "Where's my head?"

Enough sermonizing for one day.

3:11 PM FRI

Man, that bath really did me something special. Got me a new pair of jammies to put on, too, so I should be good for about another year.

OK, Ruby. To tie things up, eventually, your old mom got bored with Atlanta and hopped a semi headed for New Orleans. That's

where she met Vent and ended up where she is now. Funny how things work out. I'm riding in a duck, and met a little girl holding a duck. What are the odds? But scratch that. It's not a matter of chance, my little one, otherwise what's the use of going on? It has to be … destiny. Yeah, that's it. Destiny. Like Napoleon had, and all the masters of the art world, some poets and philosophers, too. And nothing could stop them, not even the whole freaking world. Once Sweedee gets going, can't stop her, either.

Speaking of which, you know, sometimes I wonder whatever happened to old T-bone and Rhino. Whacked those two dope-dealers plenty hard, didn't I? Probably ended up where they were destined to wind up anyway. Remember, Ruby, trash belongs in the trash. There isn't no other place for it.

Nowadays? Well, I must be getting soft or something. Biff was lucky I didn't shoot him and toss *him* in that ditch. Guess I showed him more mercy than he deserved. But I promised the Big Guy I'd let up, be nicer to people, be more giving. Like that little girl with the duck. Wonder where she is right now. I should be more like her, you know, honest and decent, not the dumb ass that I became on the streets, giving everybody H-E-double hockey sticks all the time. Especially the kid. He's a good kid. That girl's a good girl, too. Maybe I'll get another chance, to change my ways. Who knows? Just don't let them try using me, or I'll have to take out the trash like usual.

Hold on, honey. Seems like the kid's about to park us somewhere. Better go take a look and see what's up.

Talk to you later, baby. Be sweet.

23

Chris

After we'd crossed the Pearl River and passed through Columbia, the Duck entered more open country and stretches of wooded areas. Cozy dwellings lay scattered up and down the rolling terrain, with a few hill-top businesses and churches planted in between. The nearer we got to Hattiesburg, the more stoplights we encountered.

Thus far we were making good timing, coming up on Hattiesburg soon enough, and all those signs for I-59 North to Meridian kept catching my attention. All I had to do, what with Sweedee somewhere in the back, maybe napping, was to slide the Duck on over into that exit-only lane and be hitting seventy before she could open her mouth. She'd squawk alright, like she usually did. But, what the hey! The temptation was there. What could've stopped me from, you know …?

And the Duck was getting close, too. I had to make my move soon or miss the chance. I glanced back, just to be certain. No sign of that blue robe of hers yet. But just as I was about to shift over, of all things, the cell phone rang. Not Lynn this time. Another number, one I didn't recognize.

"Hello?" I queried.

"Yeah, hey, is this Chris?"

“Maybe. Who’s this?”

“This is Darla. You know me, silly. Anyway, Vent was just wanting me to check on you two, find out where y’all were at.”

“Well, tell my brother I don’t need him checking up on me. I’m moving along just fine. In fact, we’re coming up on Hattiesburg right now. And if he thinks we’re moving too slow, tell him to …”

“Oh, good, Hattiesburg … I mean, Hattiesburg? Funny thing. I have an uncle who lives in Hattiesburg. Yeah, that’s right. Haven’t heard from him in a while though. Hey, could you do me just one teeny tiny little favor? Would you mind going and checking up on him for me? I’d really appreciate it. I mean, you know I’d do anything for you, Chris. I mean, anything you like.”

“Whatever! Well, since we’re making good time, I don’t see any problem with swinging by and looking in on the old dude. Give me a street number and I’ll punch it in the GPS.”

“Okay. You ready? It’s …”

Turned out, the address for her uncle was on a side street off 98, and just a few blocks down. However, what the GPS was showing me and what I found there told two different stories. It was a corner lot alright, but there stood nothing but a red-brick funeral home. No funeral going on, mind you. When I pulled into the empty parking lot, an old looking dude in short sleeves and a ball cap was reclining against one of the porch’s white columns and smoking a cigarette. Upon seeing the Duck, he managed to pick himself up, toss the smoke, and hoist a plastic garbage bag that looked stuffed with clothes and what-not. Strangely, it felt like he’d been waiting for us to arrive.

“Hey, North!” Sweedee hollered from the back. “Why are we stopping? More gas?”

“Naw! Darla called and asked me to check up on her uncle. I just want to see if the old dude’s okay and give her a call back. Won’t take long.”

When I stepped out, the old dude greeted me with a big grin and a tipping of the cap. “Well, young fella,” he said. “Was wondering

when … uh-hum, wondering if you wouldn't mind helping out an old soldier of the Lord. You see, I was scheduled to speak at a revival meeting over at, uh, Missionary Baptist Church, but haven't heard yet from my cousin who was suppose to give me a ride there. Be a kind heart and help me fulfill my calling to, uh, to lead God's sheep to greener pastures. Would you?"

"Sorry, buddy. I'd like to help you," I began with my best evasive maneuvering, "but I'm here looking for an old dude whose niece is worried about him. I just need to find him, make sure he's okay and be on my way. We're kind of in a hurry, so …"

"Oh, but you wouldn't perhaps be speaking of my dear niece Darla, by chance, would you?"

"You mean …? Oh, so you're her uncle. Sorry, didn't realize it. She just wanted me to see if you were alright. That's really all I came for."

"But since you're here and all, couldn't you spare just a few minutes to get me to where I need to go? I can't compensate you, but there's a friend of mine there who'll be more than glad to provide a consideration."

"I don't know, I …"

I was hearing the side door creaking open, and there came Sweedee sauntering around the front end, saying, "Hey, kid! What's the hold up?"

"Oh, pardon me, madam," the old dude replied. "I'm so sorry to trouble you folks. Name's Smiley. Smiley Weathers. And you are, if I may ask?"

"Mine's Sweedee, actually. Sweedee Feathers."

If you're thinking like I did, yeah, this was way too much a coincidence.

"Well, Miss Feathers," he went on, "you two look like such fine upstanding Christians, I'm sure of it. I'd appreciate it if you could help out a fellow servant of the Lord."

"Well, sure," she said. "You know the Big Guy? You see, I'm on personal terms with him myself."

“The Big … oh, yes, yes, the man upstairs. He’s the one who sent me on this mission to spread the gospel, by the way. Like I was telling this young man, I have a flock over on the other side of town in need of tending. If y’all could …”

“We’d be happy to,” she said, slapping him on the shoulder. “Wouldn’t we, North?”

Well, there she went again, making adjustments to the itinerary. Sweedee had kept on turning this thing into some kind of vacation trip all along, leaving me to wonder if she was still serious about getting Daddy’s paintings to that museum over in Atlanta. On top of which, there was also the matter of getting herself exonerated, wasn’t there?

I mean, I had a life to get back to. The Dillards were scheduled to start another tour in a few weeks, and I wanted to enjoy as much of my free time off as a dude could possibly. Granted, I didn’t have much money of my own to fund such a venture, thus the need to get back into the groove of chasing the old buck or two. All my reserves had gotten reserved for next month’s rent, not to mention there being the cable bill, utilities and stocking up the old fridge. After that, I could lock up the place and hit the road with the other roadies and not have to worry about coming home to an eviction notice.

Miss Fuzzy Slippers, on the other hand, had hardly anything on her plate to fuss about—which kind of kept me worrying and sighing for her. I mean, I couldn’t just leave her somewhere to starve. Daddy would’ve crawled up out of that hole in the ground and whipped my butt, if I had—and no great feat, considering no one had probably yet gone out there to cover him up. How many more homeless strays, I wondered, was she gonna take in? And believe me, I wasn’t counting on being counted among such, either, if I could help it.

AS WE WERE BOARDING the Duck, Sweedee said, “Oh, by the by, North. The light in the toilet is out.”

“You mean the light in the bathroom? When did that happen?”

“Hey, I’m just the messenger. It wouldn’t hurt to take a look. On the other hand, it would hurt something terrible, if I were to go sit down and missed the thing, you know? So …”

“Okay, okay.”

While I searched for spare bulbs, Sweedee and Smiley went and sat on the sofa and commenced to conversating over coffee and doughnuts.

“You see, sister Sweedee,” the old dude started out, “my calling requires me to move around quite a bit. Why, just now I was called to this neighborhood to bring some comfort to a local widow.”

“Well,” Sweedee replied, “we are to help those less fortunate, brother Smiley. Did she find some relief.”

“Oh, did she ever! Why, it was … uh-hum, I mean to say, my ministering seems to have done her a world of good, so much so that she’s asked me to stay in touch in the event there’s a relapse. Was such a pleasure for both of us that I … I mean to say, does my spirit good to know I was of some help to her. To express her gratitude, she bagged up for me some of her late husband’s clothes, which I have right here. She was even kind enough to write a generous check toward my ministerial work.”

Fortunately, I found a pack of 60 watt bulbs in a storage closet midway back, stocked also with a number of other useful items like toilet paper, batteries, cleaning supplies, bug spray. Seems Daddy had thought of everything. There was even a rechargeable flashlight for yours-truly to use to keep himself from getting hurt while changing the light fixture.

“You know, brother Smiley,” Sweedee kept things up, “so many people are hurting out there. But it’s so good to know there are still people like you ready to lend them a hand with their troubles.”

“I know what you mean, sister,” Smiley rejoined. “Why, just last week, I lent a hand to a fellow who was in sore need of having a

most heavy burden eased from his pocket … uh-hum, I mean, his poor heart. It took some patience on my part, but I was able to lift that burden completely and restore him to his natural self again, and without him feeling any great loss."

Well, after getting that bulb in the light changed, I went up front and put the old Duck in gear and pulled out, leaving the two born-again's still chit-chatting away.

The church, according to Smiley, was clear on back over west of town somewhere—yeah, back the same way we'd just come, several miles passed I-59, in fact. My plan to get into Birmingham before dark was getting derailed mighty quick. But the dude was so sincere about his calling, I felt like my lending a hand might do something to, you know, improve my karma maybe? Not that I believed in any of that stuff, mind you. Like I said before, I'm just a sucker for someone in need, man or woman. That's just the ethic I live by. Or else, the hopelessly sympathetic sap that I am.

I then spoke toward the back and said, "Hey, uh, Mister Smiley. I'm coming up to the turn you told me about. Should I turn left or right?"

"Oh, let's have a look," he responded, coming up and sitting in the passenger seat.

Sweedee stood in between, giving it a look herself. She was really taken with the old dude—*smitten* might've been the better word for it.

"Yes, yes," he continued. "Just turn left here, young fella. That's a good soul. Now, in a few miles, you'll see a road veer off to your right."

Sweedee interjected, "Are there many sheep in your flock? I mean, the more the merrier, right?"

"Well," he replied, "just as the scripture tells us, where two or more are gathered … even two honest souls such as yourselves willing to lift up your hearts to the Lord …"

"Hear that, North?" Sweedee said with a grin. "This could be your chance to get on the Big Guy's good side. What'll you say?"

“Well,” I said, “we’re just stopping off long enough to let him out before heading on. Oh, and Mister Smiley, no need to compensate us. We’ll be just fine.”

“Oh, but you’ve been more than kind in bringing me,” he replied. “The least I can do is introduce you to some of my brethren. Everything thus far has gone so … I mean, been such a joyous encounter all around. Yes, right up here. You see?”

Well, there was a gravel road veering off to the right alright, just as he’d said. It wound through some tall piney woods for a while. Kind of a weird spot to put a church, I was figuring. We crossed a power-line right-of-way and soon came to a house trailer at the end of the road.

“You sure we made the right turn back there?” I asked.

“Well, it is a small establishment,” Smiley replied.

“I don’t see any sign.”

Sweedee spoke up, saying, “Who needs signs? I mean, it’s a missionary church. Perhaps it moves around a lot. Right, Brother Smiley?”

“As do I, Sister Sweedee,” he said. “I’ve come to see that the Lord’s work is not isolated to just one locale, you see.”

“Are we early?” I asked. “Doesn’t look like anyone else has shown up yet.”

In fact, the trailer looked kind of lonely, off to itself back there. There was a big satellite dish, a tank for propane, and one for a well. One old broken-down pickup stood in some tall grass to one side. The rest of the place had been kept mowed, at least. More like a hunting camp, if you’d asked me.

“Oh, don’t fret,” he replied. “They’ll be around shortly.”

I pulled the Duck to a stop, and we all piled out. Smiley set his stuffed bag next to the front steps and just pocketed his hands, smiling away at us.

I then heard a man’s deep gruff voice from behind me, saying, “Well, if it isn’t little Chrissy North.”

I turned around and saw this stocky dude in a cowboy hat, with

hands on hips, tattoos on his bulky arms, and a toothpick hanging from his mouth. But not only this one appeared. There also came out those two yokels, Biff and Deke, from before. Woe, Nelly!

I said, "What the … Wayne? I thought you were …"

"Guess Darla didn't tell you," Wayne said. "Got my parole just this week. Just in time to get my marching orders, too. Only, you somehow managed to scare my boys off, before I was able to catch up and get the job done. Now, it seems I'm having to hurry things along. Oh, how I hate having to hurry." He then pulled a 9mm from behind and pointed it straight at me.

Woe, Nelly, one more freaking time!

Biff started laughing. "Now I get my revenge on the whore over there. You won't be stinging me no more, honey."

Sweedee crossed her arms, smiled and said, "Second time's the charm, huh, Biffy-boy?"

"That's right, darlin'," Deke chimed in. "You not gonna get the jump on us this time. We'll make sure to …"

"Cut the crap!" Wayne hollered. "We've got a delivery to make. Alright you two, inside. Oh, and Chris, the cell phone?"

"It's on the dash," I told him. "Guess I don't have to let Darla know her uncle's safe then." I aimed that one at smiling Smiley, before we boarded the Duck.

"So sorry, son," said the would-be preacher man, coming up behind me. "The young woman was just doing her part. You see, she wants to become one of us. I guess you could say she's in training."

Wayne directed us toward the back, to sit on the bed. "Biff, getter cranked up! Of course, part of that training involves screwing your boy Junior, to keep him blind to her real work which is keeping North Brothers main clientele under the radar. Your old man was detailing hot cars for years, didn't you know that?"

"Get real!" I assured him. "Daddy would've never been caught with a stolen car in his shop. All I've heard was this thing about his dealing in stolen art."

“Get real yourself, dumb ass. North Brothers is just a front for a bigger operation. Forging pretty pictures was just a side gig. In fact, we’re here to take some of the real ones off your hands and bring them back where they belong.”

“You mean Daddy’s paintings? What’s so special about those?”

“Not for you to know just yet, buddy. Y’all sit tight back here, till we get to Atlanta. And this one …” He was waving the gun at Sweedee. “She’s our main attraction. They’ve been looking for you, honey, for a long time. Bet they’ll be glad to see you.”

“As I them,” Sweedee replied.

“Watch your mouth there, honey. I heard what you did to my boy. After I slap you around a bit, bet we’ll work that tough stuff out of you. Now, y’all sit tight and enjoy the ride.” He then handed the pistol to Smiley. “Here. Make yourself useful.”

“I assumed I already had,” Smiley said.

“Okay, then,” Wayne said, heading toward the front. “What’s for supper, Deke?”

24

Hanna

Boy, Babe! I could sure use another nap. It's been real quiet for miles now. Every time I asked something, Mama seemed like she was in another world. Mister Jordan hasn't said much, either. This private eye work is getting kind of boring, don't you think?

"Looks like we're coming up on Hattiesburg," Mister Jordan is saying. "Think they'll try the interstate this time?"

"I don't know," Mama says. "Beats me. Maybe, I guess."

"Allie, you feeling alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"You're not still sore about me not watching Hanna, are you?"

"No, not really. Everything's fine."

Wow, Babe! Something's got Mama down real hard. Wonder what? It's just like before, when Daddy loaded up a bunch of things in his car and never came home again. I'd ask her, "Is Daddy coming back? Where'd he go?" But all she'd say was, "It's alright, honey. He'll be fine. He just … has some things he's got to take care of." That's when she quit being a cop and started being an office lady. Then, Mister Jordan gave her a job being a private eye like him. After that, she started feeling better. Boy, was I relieved! It's not easy being a kid when a grown-up's not happy.

Mama, you want some of these tater chips?

“Not now, honey. Maybe later.”

It’s getting quiet again, Babe. Hope we spot Sweedee soon. Maybe that’ll perk things up.

“Clese, let me ask you something.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“This is just hypothetical, okay? Let’s say this North guy has no clue about Feathers’ past. You think he’d have a problem with us turning her in? I mean, you think he might hold it against us?”

“I’ve never met the man. I don’t know how he’d react. I’m not even sure how close he is with her. In fact, I’m not really sure why he decided to help her in the first place. Did Missus North mention what the connection was?”

“It seems she knew his dad somehow, and he feels he owes it to him for some reason. If you ask me, he’s kind of, how shall I say it, chivalrous? Sort of like Jack use to be, I suppose.”

“In that case, he sounds like a pretty upstanding guy.”

“Yeah.”

Mister Jordan keeps looking over at Mama. “Allie, you’re …”

“What?”

“You’re not …? Hold on! Look up ahead there.”

“What?”

“I think I see them.”

“Where?”

Wait, Babe! Mister Jordan thinks he sees Sweedee. Let’s look, too.

“See that motor home up there?” he’s saying. “It looks like the one Mister North described to me. *It’s an older model*, he said. That has to be them.”

Mama’s leaning forward. “Well, it looks like … looks like they’re not taking 59 after all. Amazing! They’re going the whole way on back roads, no interstates. It’s as though they’re in no kind of hurry.”

“We’ll have to stay with them then. If they pull off somewhere, we’ll park off to the side and wait.”

Wow, Babe! Maybe we'll finally get to see Sweedee. Uh-oh! Looks like they're stopping. So is everyone else. Must be a stop light. Uh-oh, again. Some car got in between us and Sweedee. But guess that's okay, in case she looks out the window and sees them and not us.

Look over there Babe. That place looks really pretty, with all those pretty buildings and grass and trees. The sign says, uh … remember, Babe, I have to spell it out to figure it out. Let's see. U-N-I-V-… that's a big word there. The next one is easier: O-F. Then, S-O-U-T-H-E-R-N. So far, if I drop some of the filler letters, it's like "you need first see Tye if Sue there in …" And the next one: M-I-S-S-I-S-S- … Wow! That's even bigger than the first one, 'specially with all those S's. Maybe it's talking about getting Tye if Sue is missing … something. Anyway, it sure is a pretty place. Maybe if we come back, I can ask Mama if we can visit there. That way, maybe we'll find out what Sue was missing.

Oh, look Babe. The cars from the other way are moving. Hey, there's a trailer coming that looks just like the one we saw back there, where that lady was putting the stickers all over it. It's got the bird on it and all, too. You know, it looks like the one Sweedee's in up yonder, but it's going the other way. That must be a favorite trailer of people, don't you think?

Okay, now we're moving again. Hope Mister Jordan can keep up with them.

"Seems they're going to stay on this road," Mister Jordan says. "Look at the map and see how far till we get out of town."

Mama's unfolding and folding again that big piece of paper. "This street goes clear through town then turns north and becomes Highway 11. Looks like it then heads straight up to Meridian."

"We'll just have to stay with them till then. After that, I'll give my buddy in Birmingham a call and alert him to the situation."

You know something, Babe? That trailer we first saw back when we had the banana's split seemed like it had something painted on the back. But this one ahead of us has nothing. Then, we saw it

again at that store where the lady was putting stickers on, but I couldn't see what was on the back then neither. And that one that just passed and going the other way, I didn't take a look at the back of it like I should've. I'm beginning to wonder if that's Sweedee up there or not. If she stuck her head in the window, we could tell.

Maybe one of them is what's called a decode or something, meaning you're suppose to see it while the other gets away. Sure wish I could see the side with the stickers, or the bird even, then I could tell for sure. And if so, then … Wait! oh no, Babe! I think we must've met Sweedee back there at that store. And that means this one is not her, though Mister Jordan thinks it is. Or else, Sweedee's going back to the store in that other one. This is all getting really confuddled, don't you think?

°

SO FAR, Mister Jordan's keeping up with the trailer he thinks is Sweedee's. It's kind of boring, just watching the back of things all the way. Look at all the different buildings in town. They're pretty, but not as pretty as the ones back where Sue was missing. And here's a bridge, and look at that river down there. It's big, huh? But not as big as the lake where Mister Jordan keeps his boat. Not much else left to look at out here, is there? It's starting to look more like country than city now. Bye bye, Hattie!

Look, Babe. One of the red lights on that trailer's backside is blinking. Hope that doesn't mean they've figured out someone's following them.

"Here they go," Mister Jordan says. "They're about to turn into that parts place on the left, looks like."

"Just keep your distance, Clese. Don't let them see us."

Now, they're turning in. Wait, Babe. There's no bird on the side of that one.

Mama, I don't think that's them. There's no bird.

"What? What do you mean, a bird?"

I remember a bird on that other trailer we saw. That's not them. I'm sure of it.

"Let's wait and see anyway," Mister Jordan says. "That could've been a different trailer you saw, sweetheart."

Mama's looking at Mister Jordan kind of funny. "Wait, I don't understand. When did you see their trailer? And why didn't you say something?"

"Hold on! Stay here."

"Clese, what are you doing?"

Babe, there goes Mister Jordan. He's going over to see if that's Sweedee. But I'm sure of it, that it can't be. Now, Mama's getting out. We better go, too, Babe. Stay close, okay?

"Pardon me, sir," Mister Jordan's speaking to that old guy who just got out of the trailer. "You wouldn't happen to know a Miss Susan Feathers, would you, by chance?"

"Feathers? Naw, never heard of them. What's this about? Is y'all FBI or something?"

"No, sir. We're private investigators. We must've mistook your motor home for one we've been tracking. So sorry to have bothered you."

"No problem, as long as you're not feds. I like carry my guns with me and don't need nobody telling me I can't."

"I assure you, sir," Mister Jordan's telling him. "We're not with the government."

"Well, okay then. Sorry I couldn't help you none. Y'all have a good day."

So I was right, wasn't I, Babe? Mama's got her arms crossed, like when she's mad about something.

"So that wasn't them, huh?" she's saying. "Man! We wasted all that time, too. No telling where they are now."

"Well … give Missus North a call and see if she's heard from them. Maybe they did take the interstate."

Boy, Babe. This may take all day. Private eye work can be so tiring. Wonder if we'll ever find them.

"*G'day!*"

Wow! That's a pretty woman that just walked up. And she looks strong, too. And with her long black hair tied in a ponytail, it goes all the way down her back. And she's wearing boots! Never seen a woman before with boots on.

She's speaking to Mister Jordan now. "You folks wouldn't happen to be headed to Laurel by chance, would ya?" Her voice is pretty, too, though funny sounding, like someone from a far'n country.

Mister Jordan's asking her, "Laurel?"

"It's just up the road a bit. Bother you for a lift, could I?"

"Sorry, we're on business. My company doesn't allow us to take on passengers. Sorry."

"How about the little one there?"

Mama's on the phone, but saying to her, "Oh, she's my daughter … hello, Missus North?"

"North?" the pretty woman's saying. "By jingos! If he ain't gotten himself hitched already."

"You're familiar with Vent North?" Mister Jordan's asking her.

"Who, Vent? Shucks no! Never met the bloke. It's his brother Chris. We … tangled a bit."

You know, she looks like she's happy about tangling. Whenever I tangled with Lizzy on the playground, it left me kind of sore, Lizzy being bigger and all.

Mama's breaking in now. "Clese, she says she's tried calling him, but he's not answering."

Mister Jordan doesn't look pleased about that. "You think they might've broken down somewhere?"

"Who knows? Yes, Missus North. We'll keep an eye out and let you know the first thing."

The pretty woman is bending over and whispering something to me. "Ten to one, he's in the crapper. Eh?" And winking, too. Wow, she's funny.

Mister Jordan's looking up and down the road like he's

wondering where Sweedee might've run off to. "I'm still betting the interstate, but they could even be somewhere up ahead of us by now."

"He bolted on ya, eh?" the pretty woman is asking. "Well, if I know Chris North—and I know him quite well—he's heading back to his digs in Birmingham. Could give you directions, if I could get a ride up to Laurel in exchange."

Mama's finished with the phone. "You mean, you're traveling on foot, and by yourself? That's mighty risky, being that you're …"

"What, you think me an alf? Fat chance of that happening, not when I'm packing one of these …"

Wow, Babe! She's got a knife longer than my arm. She just pulled it out from her belt like it was magic.

"Cute dover, eh? And on top of that …"

She put it back then reached down for that huge gun on her leg. That thing is so big, even bigger than Mama's was, when she was on the force.

Mister Jordan looks a little scared, stepping back a bit when he saw it.

"There's my model 83, which just to look at sends any ol' Bruce to shakin' a leg. Besides, desperate times call for desperate measures. I've got my chopper back up in Laurel for repairs, you see. They couldn't fly in the part it needed quick enough. So I decided best be quicker if I'd hitch my way down and fetch it myself. Now, it's just a matter of how to get back, which is all that I'm asking of you folks. I can even pitch in for a little petro to sweeten the deal. Deal?"

Mister Jordan's sighing again. "Just to Laurel, huh? Well, it shouldn't be too much of a problem. Allie?"

Mama's got her arms crossed again, sighing and all, too. She doesn't seem too happy with Mister Jordan saying it's okay. "Well, if you're okay with it, I guess, since it's on the way."

They're letting her go, Babe. It's going to be nice having someone to chat with, even if she is a grown-up. She's fun to listen

to, too. Eh, Babe?

"By the hoo," she's saying, "name's Mosby."

"Clese Jordan."

"Uh, Allie Babbit. Oh, and this is Hanna."

"Happy to meet ya there, Hanna!"

And this is Babe. He's happy to meet you, too.

"As am I. Shall we then? I've gotta get my chopper out of the shop before they shut down."

Okay, Babe. We're back on the road. See? Knew things would perk up sooner or later.

CONNECTIONS

Laurel Birmingham

25

Chris

To Sweedee's consternation—and if Wayne had known, he'd have gone ahead and done it for spite anyway—the head dude told Biff to hit I-59 and keep it above seventy. He seemed plenty anxious to get us and the paintings back to his bosses in Atlanta. They must've promised him a bonus, I figured. He and Deke hung out up front, watching TV, while Smiley kept the gun on us in the back. That consternation of hers must've went double for the would-be preacher who'd somehow managed to get the better of Miss Tough Stuff. Despite his turning out to be one of the bad guys, that in itself was some feat, if you'd asked me.

"I assure you, Sister Sweedee," Smiley told her, "I meant you and your companion no ill-will."

"Can it, Smelly!" Sweedee shot back. "The brother and sister act is kaput. And believe you me, the Big Guy is none too happy right now with you impersonating one of his own. You talked a good talk, I'll admit. But you've strayed way too far from the walk, my man, going and hanging with those bozos."

"It's just that this is my chosen profession, you see," he continued. "I'm too old and greedy to do much else, much less shepherd a flock without fleecing a few. You've got to understand …"

“Oh, I understand,” Sweedee retorted, wiggling her finger at him. “I dealt with plenty of your kind out on the street. Seems these eyes must be getting old, not seeing through your crapola sooner.”

“What I don’t understand,” I inserted, with Smiley in mind, “what’s the deal with my daddy’s paintings? Or are you at liberty to tell us?”

“Well, if you must know,” Smiley said, pausing to take a glance towards the front, “concerning dear old Ventress, I only knew the man from the training sessions we were occasionally put through. A really solid fellow, I must say, quite sure of himself. I see now why he was so entrusted with certain of the Syndicate’s valuables. They also happened to be in need of good quality forgeries, which Ventress was quite capable of supplying.”

“Forgeries? For what?”

Sweedee held up a finger to check Smiley again. “This one’s my ball. You see, North, back aways, old Sweedee didn’t just sit around on her patootie waiting for her daily bread. She spent a good portion of her homeless days doing some serious thinking. That’s right! And none of those idiots back at Emmanuel were counting on her having a mind for figuring out their game, either. Didn’t pick up on it right away, of course, but after learning how to gather up enough half-smoked butts off the ground to make a full pack—which is not easy, considering the fierce competition you keep bumping into—you gain a lot of knowledge about how packages are put together. Anyhoo, turns out what those Syndicate fiends were doing was skimming off the good works and replacing them with fakes, some done by the hand of your dad, sad to say. Am I right, Smiley baby?”

“Yes, my dear sister,” replied the film-flam preacher. “Uh, I mean, Miss Sweedee. You see, it wasn’t so much about stealing valuable paintings as it had to do with fooling the insurers of such works, thus bringing in the bigger bucks whenever a prized acquisition went missing. A beautiful scheme, I must say, but bound to show a chink or two. The way it was explained to me, the

authorities were nearly set onto the Syndicate's whole operation, soon after another gallery which had borrowed what they assumed were original pieces then made their own discovery. So, to cover our own patooties, our fine ruse needed a diversion, a decoy, to lure all eyes away from its unraveling. And that must've been where Miss Sweedee made her unfortunate entrance. To put it bluntly, our superiors made it appear she was the one behind the whole plan to replace originals with copies. Now, as to the young man's question regarding why they would take such interest in those original works done by Ventress himself, I haven't a clue."

Sweedee snapped her fingers and said, "Should've seen it! See, kid, when your big bro phoned them about me recommending the museum for displaying Vent's art work, they must've mistook those pieces of his for the ones he was hoarding for them. Such imbeciles!"

"Oh, I get it," I mused out-loud. "They must've thought we were bringing them the goods they were after. But I wonder if they knew it included that other …"

Sweedee elbowed me at that point. Actually, I never did see where she'd stashed Luke's Mary. That one was obviously her baby and best to be left unmentioned for the moment. Sort of like with Pandora's box, the old tale where all the gifts to humanity were allowed to escape except for one, hope. This one was Sweedee's one big hope, and she wouldn't part with it for all the coffee and doughnuts in the world.

In fact, I never knew anyone who could consume large quantities of such, on top of the chain-smoking, and not get sick. Those were like the only things which had been fueling her nerve and grit thus far, and *my* main hope was to keep her in good supply —though in the current situation, with Wayne having confiscated the gold card, that hope seemed in danger of slipping out of the box, as well.

"So, um, Smiley boy," Sweedee continued, "I don't see your, uh … you know." She was gesturing toward his arm

“Oh, this?” Smiley lifted and turned his arm, to show us, just above the elbow, the tattoo of a red spider, one like I’d once seen on my old man’s arm. “It symbolizes who we are. You know, spiders are masters of engineering. Just so, each of us in the Syndicate has come to master the art of weaving various webs of trickery and deceit. It beats going at it alone, and it pays better, too.”

“*Hey, Smiley!*” the head honcho called from up front. “Take a break. I’ve got some new orders from ol’ Doc. Come on up and I’ll fill you in.”

“Excuse me,” Smiley said. “Duty calls.”

As soon as Smiley was out of sight, Sweedee leaned back, extracted something from behind a pillow, and pocketed it. I had a hunch of what it was, but made like an imbecile myself. It appeared now she was devising yet another of her devious plans. I just wished she would’ve let me in on the details every now and then. Play-acting at the spare of the moment didn’t top my list of skills.

Next, Sweedee took out that little recorder of hers, looked at it, then pocketed it, too.

“You know, North,” she said, staring straight ahead, “when you don’t have a place to come home to, you get to doing a lot of thinking, just like I said earlier. I mean, there’s really not much else to do anyway, except wondering what’s not for dinner, of course. Anyway, I’ve been putting my mind to work for a long time now. Remember back when I went looking for my lighter and found Luke’s Mary instead?”

I replied, “That was back in the bathroom at Twin Cedars, wasn’t it?”

She looked over at me, eye-brows lifting. “You remembered! Not half bad, kid. Well, you didn’t have to, but you helped me then. Remember that?”

“Well, yeah,” I told her. “Sure, I didn’t know what I was getting myself into at the time. But yeah, guess I helped out a little.”

“So, here I am on this journey in search of something else. And it seems I’m having to ask you again. Can you help me?”

“What are you looking for?”

“I guess I’m looking for … for her.”

“Who’s that?”

Sweedee sighed. “Never mind.”

“To be honest, I’m looking for someone, too. Don’t know how that happened, though.”

“Think it could be the same one?”

I laughed. “I … I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Aah! Me neither.”

Wayne then came down the hall, followed by Smiley. He had possession of the gun now. “Well, it seems you two won’t be needed anymore. Next town, we’ll be dropping y’all off and moving on. Till then, …”

“What?” I yelled out. “You’re going to leave us on the side of the road? Just like that? How’re we supposed to get back? You took my credit card.”

“Oh, I’m sure you and your sweetie pie will figure some way of surviving. I mean, she spent a good long haul on her own, didn’t she? Sure she learned a trick or two. Doing tricks, more like it.”

Sweedee growled a bit at that one.

“Anyway, that’s the plan,” he wound up. “So hang tight. Stay with them, Smiley, while I scout out a nice drop-off point.”

°

I COULD TELL we’d hardly gone far outside Hattiesburg, when Wayne’s bosses decided they had no use for Sweedee anymore—which seemed strange, considering what Smiley had just divulged. After the Duck exited I-59, I looked through the window and saw a sign pointing to Laurel, a place I recalled the GPS showing as being not too far up the road. It looked like your typical small Southern town, for the most part. Wayne had Biff turn left onto a highway which happened to be highway 11, the very one I’d planned on taking to Meridian. It was headed in the right direction, but for

Sweedee and me things had met the end of the line, at least for now.

After about a mile, Wayne hollered to Biff, “Right there, partner! That’s perfect.”

The Duck turned left onto a side street then into a large graveled parking area fronted by some shade trees.

“Trip’s over, folks!” Wayne said, taking the gun again and using it to direct us toward our exit point. Stepping outside, I could see that the lot belonged to a restaurant of some kind, with a few cars and a pickup parked along one side. “Oh, and Chris …” He then threw a wadded twenty onto the ground. “Supper’s on me, bud. Enjoy!”

Cheesy as the gesture was, I retorted, “How’re we suppose to get back home again?”

“Beats me. Not my problem. Okay, Biff!” He shut the door, and the Duck turned around and jumped back on the highway. End of story—or was it?

While Sweedee kept eyeing the restaurant, I took the time to scan the vicinity for some sort of refuge. With oodles of house trailers for rent lining the nearby side street, but no dough in my pocket, that was a no-go. An old church kept vigil across the highway, but the directions it offered weren’t exactly conducive to my temperament at the moment. That only left the eating place, with a sign out front reading, “Hog Wild BBQ.”

“What other choice do we have?” I wondered out loud.

“Like the jerk said,” Sweedee replied, “beats me. So, let’s eat.” She then scooped up the twenty, pocketed it, and started for the main entrance.

Turned out, I really didn’t have much left to complain about, at least not for a while. The place had an all-you-can-eat barbecue rib special going on for twelve bucks. Sweedee slapped the twenty on the counter, said we’d be sharing the special, and to keep the change as tip. One of the waitresses seated us and brought out our first platter of some of the juiciest, most tender ribs I’d tasted in a

long time. Oh, and plenty of napkins, too.

But after I'd loaded my plate and before I could get the first chunk in my mouth, Sweedee grabbed my wrist, saying, "Hold up, kid! We've got something to say."

"Talk away," I said. "I'm listening." I tried bringing the rib to my mouth again.

She gripped harder, even growled a bit. "Not you, you wimp! The Big Guy!" She then squeezed her eyes shut and said, "Thanks, Big G, for getting us out of that scrape and getting some good grub in our bellies. Oh, and North thanks you, too. Okay, kid, you're good."

Sweedee chose some ribs for herself and was stuffing her mouth, while I was left trying to ring up the difference on that little exchange. I just wrote it off like before and bit into that meaty wonder I'd been fingering.

We both continued chowing down without saying much of anything. Sweedee was about to signal for our next platter, when the waitress appeared and switched out the empty with some more dark and juicy delights.

Feeling plenty full and relaxed now, I sat back, took some sips from a cold mug of beer—what the hey! I wasn't driving anymore—and said, "Well, I have to say, it could've been worse. He could've just dropped us off in the middle of nowhere and made us sweat our way to the nearest town."

"I still say the jerk needs a serious attitude adjustment," Sweedee replied. "Like, a good whack att-uh that fat head of his. Strange that he knew *you* from some place."

"He's an old buddy of my brother's. They got into all kinds of crap together in high school—rather, Wayne was the one who got Vent into trouble more times than Daddy should've put up with. But for some reason, Daddy was harder on me than he was on him."

"That's because he knew you were the smarter of the two. It's how things work in families. Of course, in mine, I was the only one, so they saw no need to make a fuss. I did my homework, made good

grades, never got knocked up. My folks were pretty groovy with most of what I did."

"Groovy? That's an old one."

"Beats 'cool' or 'rad' which don't make much sense to me. I mean, if something's hot, they call it cool. And if it's new, they say it's hip, even though there have been hippies around for a long time. Groovy means it's … in the groove. You know, like a good sounding LP album on the turntable."

"I never cared much for LP's, with all those pops and crackling noises. Give me something on a good clean sounding CD, with all that junk filtered out."

"Hey, that 'junk' as you call it is what makes it real and special. Gives it character, heart and soul and all that. Those little CD's make for handy mirrors, but that's about it. Numbers! It's all freaking numbers, cold as a machine."

I started laughing. "It's so weird how we got from Wayne Hadley to CD's."

"Who cares?" Sweedee shot back. "You want those last two ribs there? Maybe we can get them to bag us up some more for the road, you think?"

After a while, some more people started trickling into the place. It was getting on to Friday evening, after all. More important, how were we going to get anywhere without money? Like I said, Wayne had confiscated the gold card I'd been using, which was fine by me. I was starting to feel kind of sick at the thought that I'd been using dirty money to fund our trip. On top of that, it'd been the main support for my whole family's life for the previous ten or so years. How could anyone live with such a bummer? And there was another question to consider …

"You know," I observed, "Wayne was really quick with giving us the ol' heave-ho back there. Wonder why that was, especially with you?"

"Maybe they had no use for old Sweedee anymore, after all these years. Must've found someone else to pin the racket on. Kind

of throws a wet rat into the hamper, doesn't it?"

"Ugh! Well, if you put it that way … Yeah, it does have a stench to it. And whatever in the world they wanted with Daddy's paintings, that just … The whole thing just stinks big time. Makes me wonder if Vent Junior said something to them, just to cut me out of everything and get himself a bigger piece of the pie."

"Speaking of pie, you think they offer dessert with this meal? You know, something to settled the stomach. Mine's starting to cramp up a bit …"

"… *And here I find you stuffin' your mug, for the love of* …"

Now, that last voice wasn't mine, I could tell you that, especially since I didn't speak with an Australian accent. No, it could've been only one person, and that one was standing over us with hands on hips and the cutest smirk on her face.

My own stunned face would've been the one to laugh at, actually. "Mosby!"

"Well, at least you haven't gone and pretended to forget my name, not with your new …" She was nodding toward Sweedee.

I started waving my hands big time. "Oh! No, no. It's not … I mean, she's just …"

Sweedee picked up another rib and, with a not-so-cute smirk on her face, added, "Oh, come on, North. The secret's out already." She then winked at Mosby and went to gnawing.

26

Hanna

What do you think, Babe? While we've been riding, Miss Mosby has been teaching me a new game called rock-paper-sizzuh's. But after a few tries, it's like she can tell what I'm going to do. If I think rock, she does paper. If I think paper, she does sizzuh's. I've got to try thinking one thing and do another and see where that goes. Think, paper, then do rock. No, she did it again! I've got to know her secret so I can decode better.

Mister Jordan's saying something now. "So, Miss Mosby, I take it you're not originally from here. Your, um, accent makes me think Australian for some reason."

"You'd be right. South Australia, actually," Miss Mosby says. "Born and reared near a place called Nullarbor. My gramps had a ranch there, that's where I grow up originally."

No-luh- … Noo-luh-bah …

"Means 'no trees'," she's whispering to me. "But don't let it fool you. We had trees alright, just not as big as yours are."

Mama's asking her, "Must've been kind of a rough place, if you have to arm yourself like you do."

"Oh, the folks there are swell. Just the living was a bit rough. It's the outback, you see. I learned to shoot from my gramps. He was a bounty hunter. Made a good living at it, too, hunting wild

dogs and dingos and such. My mum, she worked at the roadhouse. My dad …? Well, there was this trucker that came through and got my mum knocked up with me then never came back for us. So, I never did think of the bloke as my dad. Gramps was dad enough."

"How did you wind up over here?" Mama's asking again.

"Well, Mum's half-brother Drew was first to leave for the States when I was just a whelp. When Mum died, he sent for me to come live with him in Birmingham. Later, Unk retired and moved elsewhere. So I've been bumming around on my own ever since."

Bumming? You don't look like a bum.

"Thank you kindly, luv," she's telling me, grinning. "I mean odd jobs here and there. Lately, it's been potting seedlings at a nursery. But what I really want to do is get into landscaping. I have this artistic side of me what wants to create living spaces. Working at a nursery, you get to know all about plants and such, but nothing about the fine things you can do with them. That's my dream, if you want to know."

I like that dream. You can start in our yard, if you like.

Mama's saying, "Honey, apartments don't have yards. You're thinking of grandma's place."

Well, maybe she can make grandma's yard look fine and living.

"I'd love to," Miss Mosby's saying. "I could always use a helper. Interested?"

Mama, can I?

"You've got to finish school first. After that, we'll … talk about it later. By the way, Miss Mosby, how do you know this guy Chris North?"

"We dated some, but then broke up. He never was much for settling, which … can't blame the bloke, can I? He loves being on the road. But listen at me. Of course, I'm only on the road because … well, just down visiting my unk, that's all. Soon as I get my chopper squared away, I'll be heading back. Allie, was it? You've got a better half, too, I take it."

"We're separated at the moment. Just me and Hanna."

“But there is someone, am I right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s really none of your …”

“Sorry, luv. Didn’t mean to be rude. I just have this sense of things, that’s all.”

Mister Jordan’s looking at Mama. “Allie, I don’t believe she meant to pry or anything.”

“It’s fine, fine,” Mama’s saying. “I’m just not in the habit of telling my business to strangers, that’s all.”

Miss Mosby’s leaning toward me and whispering, “Bet he’s a looker, eh?”

Babe, I’ve never seen Mama with anyone except Daddy. Wonder who Miss Mosby is sensing? Maybe she can help us sense Sweedee and where she is—or maybe if Sweedee has a guy, too. Never thought of that one, did we, Babe.

“So, Miss Mosby,” Mister Jordan’s speaking again. “Tell me about your grandfather. I’m interested in what a bounty hunter does down under.”

“Well, Gramps, he …”

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I’M REALLY worried about Mama, Babe. It’s like she’s become bored with everything all of a sudden. Back when we picked up Miss Mosby and left Hattie, she talked a little but then got real quiet, ‘specially after Miss Mosby asked her about a guy she knew, which I never knew. After that, it was just Mister Jordan and Miss Mosby talking about catching bad dogs and ding-dongs. Then, after we left Miss Mosby at the place where they were fixing the thing she chops with—must’ve been an even bigger knife than the one she totes with her, I suppose—we stopped at this other place to eat, and Mama’s been staring out the window, saying nothing and not eating much of anything on her plate. If it were me leaving stuff, she’d get mad and not let me watch cartoons till I finished mine. I think

Mister Jordan senses something's wrong, too. He hasn't said much either. We're all just sitting here like we're being punished or something. And nobody knows where Sweedee is—although I wonder if Miss Mosby might've sensed it out already.

You see, we were driving into this town and playing that game again, with me trying to decode her sensing what I was thinking, when Miss Mosby looked away like she'd seen something or someone on the side of the road. I asked her what she saw.

"Ay? Oh, no biggie, luv," she said. "I just have this sixth sense which tells me things other people can't know. Guess I was born with it."

A sick sense? What's that?

"Well, you know you have five, don't you? Your eyes, your ears, your nose, your tongue, and your hands that feel things. I call this other one my woo-woo."

Your woo-woo? What does it say?

"That there was someone … I didn't half expect. Back there. At least that's what it felt like. A friend, you see."

I wonder if I have a woo-woo. I'd use it to try and tell where Sweedee is, and help Mama and Mister Jordan.

"Well, mine tells me we may see your friend Sweedee yet."

Wow, Babe! We may not be that far from finding her. If I could just figure out how to use my own woo-woo better …

Mama, you want some of my fries?

She's mumbling, "I wonder if that was … if he was really … If she and he were …" Now, she's talking normal. "Oh, honey, no. You eat them. I'm not that hungry right now."

Mister Jordan's patting his belly. "Well, I think I'm about done myself. Once you're finished with yours, young lady, we'll be going. Okay?"

Okay!

Guess I can eat one, no maybe two or three more. I want to eat more, but I don't want to make Mama feel bad for not eating hers. She may get hungry later on and want some. I'll try to save as many

as I can.

"It's been long enough, Allie," Mister Jordan is saying. "Why don't you give Missus North another call."

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course. Hanna, finish up your plate, honey."

Yes, Mama.

Babe, I guess we've got to eat more fries then. Just can't help it.

Guess we know now, huh, Babe? That must've been Sweedee we met putting stickers on her trailer. But what were they doing going back near Hattie, when we were following that other trailer? Maybe she forgot something, which leads me to think they might be still back there. I'm trying to listen to my woo-woo, but it doesn't seem to want to tell me anything more right now.

"Missus North still hasn't heard anything," Mama's saying. "Think we should wait or go on?"

"Good question," Mister Jordan says, looking at his watch. "If we wait and they're already ahead of us, we've wasted time. But if they're having trouble and we head on to Birmingham, that means we might be waiting all night before we hear anything. If we just had a clue as to which way they went …"

Maybe they went back.

"Back where?"

To that place I met Sweed … oops!

Uh-oh, Babe. Got Mama's attention, didn't we?

"Come to mention it," she's saying to Mister Jordan, "you said something about that earlier, but you didn't finish."

"Allie, she just thinks it was her. There was another motor home parked at that store we stopped at, but I don't think …"

But it had to be her. Even Miss Mosby said so.

"Miss Mosby?" Mama looks kind of mad now. "When did she say that?"

I don't know. I guess it was when she said her woo-woo told her that it might be Sweedee back there.

"Her woo-woo?! Hanna, you're getting me confused, honey. How could she have known about your seeing Sweedee at that

store?"

Not there. It was before we let Miss Mosby out, back …

Mister Jordan seems to think I'm being funny. "Her woo-woo, huh?"

Back … back …

Babe, I must be seeing things. There's Sweedee's trailer with the stickers right now, parked at that red-light over there. And it's going back where we came from. Can't be another decode. This one's for real. Miss Mosby was right. Sweedee was nearer than we thought.

Mama, there's Sweedee now. See, her trailer's got all the stickers on it. Miss Mosby was right.

Mister Jordan's stopped laughing. "Oh, my gosh! It's them!"

Mama's turned to look, as well. "What? Where …? Oh, it can't be!"

27

Chris

And there was Mosby. Here and now.

It was like this. All I'd ever wanted, back when I was a young dude, was to go out there and find that one thing I was meant to have. You know, the usual: fame, fortune, all the chicks a dude could handle, or at least one fine down-home type who wouldn't mess with my head. That was all I had been dreaming about back then, before going and arguing with my old man and leaving home like I did. Had no idea what I'd find out there, you see, nor could I have seen how things would've ever come to this.

Mosby. Here and now.

Back then in Birmingham, when I'd finally settled for the single life of a roadie slash would-be songwriter, all I needed was for this chick Mosby to show up in my life, size me up, then start talking about us high-tailing it to the mountains and getting ourselves lost. After all, she was Australian, and you better believe the finest looking Aussie to ever squeeze into a pair of jeans and leather boots.

That was when we were still dating. She couldn't have been that serious about all the mountain stuff, I figured, definitely not after that one evening at Mott's where we'd been celebrating my getting back from touring, with her trying to convince me we could take on

those three biker dudes, the one's with biceps out to here, the one's who'd pissed her off, talking about how a chick didn't have what it took to tame a Harley. They'd meant that in a respectful way, mind you—you know, below the belt and all. But she was fit to be tied, whacking that bottle across the bar. I mean, she would've gotten somebody hurt, honestly, if the bouncer hadn't been a friend and stepped in.

Later that same evening, with us piled up in my tiny bed in my even tinier trailer, following yet another wild night of rough and tumble, that's when she ups with this notion of strapping me to her hog and dragging me up into the Smokies, finding a cabin and a few acres, making a few babies, then dropping down on weekends to raise hell among the locals. The chick was certified. But that didn't stop me from thinking her the hottest thing to straddle two wheels.

But Mosby couldn't top me for crazy. Crazy I was then for letting her ride off like she did, after I'd gotten that call from Lynn about Daddy. Still, there she was, up and dressed early the next morning and sitting on her bike with a pack strapped to the back instead of me.

She was revving the engine, and I had to say something stupid like, "I don't know why you're so pissed."

Mosby revved some more and said, "It could've been bonzer, North. You and me, luv, wrapped in each other's arms for the rest of freaking eternity."

"I said I'll be back. I just have to check on Mama and the rest, then I'll be back."

"Well, take care of it, luv. Take bloody care of it!"

And she was off.

I figured I'd seen the last of her, that I'd never know another woman half as honest and true as that chick was. But then, that was my fault, wasn't it?

AND NOW …

"Been too long, North," Mosby said. "What've you been up to, besides datin' women twice your age?"

She had led me to the back of the barbecue place, near the restrooms.

"Sweedee was just kidding," I tried setting her straight. "It's not like that, I tell you."

"Oh, and how is it?" She started moving in closer. "Let me check first." Next thing, she had me against the wall and was pressing her lips to mine. Woe, baby! But then, a minute later, she pulled away, with this stunned look on her face, followed by a deep sigh. "Just as I thought. You're with someone else."

"What? No! I …"

"Happened rather recent, too, from what I can sense."

"Man, that sixth sense of yours! Gotta tell you, it's off this time. Believe me. There's no one."

She sighed again and crossed her arms. "You really are a trip, North. You left me, mad as a cut snake, and didn't have the guts to chunk'em all and come back looking for me. Instead, I find you here, your heart squarely in someone else's hand."

"If you'd just … and by the way, how did you know where I was?"

"You've known me long enough to know what I'm capable of. Besides, turns out I met two private dicks who were trailing you and your … friend, you say? Anyway, seems there's a bounty on your friend's noggin. I sent them on to your shack in Birmingham. Is there something you're not telling me? You get some dingo's kid knocked up?"

"That's news to me, someone else following us? We had a run-in with some thugs who stole my rig and … you mean, you sent them to my place?"

This news of hers was telling me that things had gotten a lot more complicated than I'd figured. I started wondering who'd put those other people onto our trail, and what for. They weren't cops—

that is, unless Vent Junior had wanted to keep an eye on Sweedee and make sure she wasn't shafting the family. Yeah, the good little Executor!

"Anyway," I said, "we're kind of dead in the water at the moment without any wheels. You don't think you could help us out, do you? I mean, I know there's only room for two on your bike."

Mosby laughed. "You really are a trip, you know that? Well, let me use the bog first, then I'll arrange some form of rescue for you, you dork you."

While Mosby went to use the facilities, I headed back to the table to let Sweedee know that help was on the way.

Trouble was, Sweedee wasn't there. I knew she hadn't gone to the can, so I figured she must've headed outside somewhere for a smoke.

•

NOW, with Mosby materializing the way she'd done, I could've sworn I'd been seeing things. However, after getting outside to hunt up Sweedee, I spotted Mosby's all-chrome Harley chopper sitting on the far side of the lot, so that proved the matter well enough. What got me to thinking I was really seeing things was seeing the Duck parked not more than ten feet from it. That one I had to take a closer look at to be sure I wasn't hallucinating. But after I'd gone and rounded the front end, reality went and slapped my bearded face to wake me up, with the barrel of a gun pointed right at it. Woe, freaking Nelly!

"So, how about it, Chrissy boy?" a pissed-looking Wayne snarled. "Where'd you stash the goods, huh?"

"Wait a minute, Wayne," I said, trying to use my hands as shields. "What are you …?"

Sweedee was backed up against the Duck with her arms folded, with Biff leaning into her and grinning. Deke was standing off to the side, while Smiley was stepping down out of the doorway.

Biff tried sticking his face in Sweedee's, saying, "This one here tried pulling a fast one on us, again."

Sweedee turned her head my way, shaking it and rolling her eyes.

"Listen you little squirt," Wayne said, continuing to inch that barrow toward my nose. "We had to go and tear the place apart looking for those paintings of your old man's. They said you were bringing them with you. So, where are they?"

"Serves us right," said Biff, "not looking before we dropped them off. If it'd been up to me, I'd of …"

"Shut up!" Wayne shot back at him. "Now, then. Perhaps ol' Chrissy boy needs a little more persuading." He then backed up, switched the 9mm to his other hand, then aimed it at Sweedee's bowed head, causing Biff himself to back off for a change.

"I'm telling you, man," I pleaded, "we had them when we left Baton Rouge. I'm sure they're somewhere. Gotta be."

Wayne then cocked the pistol and held it closer to Sweedee's forehead while keeping an eye on me.

Sweedee looked up at what was in her face. Her eyes bugged and blinked. A second later, her arms went limp, eyes rolled back, and her body collapsed to the ground.

"Sweedee!" I shouted.

Wayne's expression switched from menacing to dumbstruck. "What the …? Where'd she …?" He finally looked down then backed away at the sight of her body lying crumpled there at his feet. "Uh, what … what happened here?"

"Wayne, you screwed up, man," I tried with my best bluff. "You gave her a heart-attack. They're gonna lock you up for good this time."

"What? No! This can't be happening. I'm not going back there."

Smiley started to step forward. "Come now, Hadley. You oughtn't have been so forceful, frightening the poor woman."

Wayne then turned the gun on the preacher man. "That's not what this is about. How was I to know she'd croak like that?"

“Boss!” both Biff and Deke were hollering. “We don’t want no part of killing people. Maybe we need to get out of here.”

“Nobody’s going anywhere!” Wayne shouted. “She’s just …” He went over and nudged her with his foot. “Come on, lady! Wake up there. Okay?”

It looked like Biff and Deke were about to high-tail it. Smiley, too, though he seemed a little hesitant, still staring down at Sweedee. Guess he’d taken a liken to her, as well, though pointlessly so.

Wayne then bent over her, poking her shoulder with the gun barrel.

I was a bit worried myself, I have to say. I mean, Sweedee was already somewhat over on the downhill side of life, after all. It could’ve been a heart-attack, considering all her smoking and chomping on sweets done for no telling how long. But then, all of a sudden, her right arm shot up, jabbing something into Wayne’s side.

The dude started convulsing and let the gun drop. He then staggered and fell back onto the gravel, flopping around and groaned something terrible. Biff and Deke rushed back and stood over him, unsure what to do.

Next thing, Sweedee was on her knees, scooping up the gun. On her feet now, she still staggered a bit. But then, after straightening herself out and pocketing that stun gun she’d been toting, she lifted the 9mm and had it aimed at Wayne’s head. In my mind I had a flash of a vision of Sweedee in handcuffs and being led to the electric chair, which got me to thinking, *Woe, Nelly, Woe!*

Just then, I sensed someone come from behind and slip right past me, then saw that same someone gently lift the thing from Sweedee’s trembling hand.

“I’ll be taking it from here, luv,” Mosby said. With one smooth move, she ejected both the clip and the chambered bullet, tossed the thing, and whipped out her model 83. A pretty impressive piece, let me tell you, with that massive barrel sticking out like all get-go. And at the sight of that one smart move, all three dudes

scuttled away like crabs, with hands raised and faces contorted. Wayne even tried scurrying like a mouse along the ground, when he spotted the big iron this biker chick was wielding over him.

Sweedee looked from Mosby to me, with her eyes raised, mouth gaping … and thumbs up. I would've never thought anything could've impressed her so.

"Now then, fellas," Mosby said. "We'll just get this over with nice and quick now, won't we?"

Biff's voice was quivering as he said to her, "You … you're … not gonna kill us all, are you? I mean, it was Wayne here that was fixing to shoot her. We … we didn't do nothing but follow orders."

"All of you," Mosby hollered, "turn around!"

Biff and Deke went to whimpering while helping Wayne up. Even big boss, as tough as he'd been behaving, seemed eager to comply.

"Mosby!" I said. "Tell me you're not really gonna …"

She mouthed to me, "Of course not," backing it up with a wink and that lovely cocking of one corner of her lips.

I then noticed Smiley trying to get my attention. When I stepped toward him, he reached into his pocket and held out to me the gold card.

"Perhaps, you think," he whispered, "this would persuade the young lady to …"

"What the …?" Wayne mumbled, patting his own back pocket. "Smiley, you little …!"

Mosby cocked her pistol, making Wayne gasp and decide to let that one go.

"Alright, gents!" Biker Chick hollered now. "Let me see you drop'em, jocks and all."

"What?!" Wayne grunted. "Are you nuts?"

"My dear lady," Smiley added, now joining the rest of the crew, "you can't be serious. Not after I … Not in front of …"

Mosby whipped out that huge knife of hers and added, "Or do I have to undo them for you?"

All four gents then readily caved and commenced unzipping.

Sheathing the knife, Mosby called to me, “North, best be loading up. I’ll hold these blokes till you’ve pulled out.”

“And you?”

“Be right behind you, mate.”

“You heard the gal, kid,” Sweedee said. “Let’s boogie!”

I was letting Sweedee board ahead of me, when Mosby had to go and add, “Oh, and Chris. I’ll be expected fair compensation later on. You understand me, don’t you?”

To be honest and for the moment, I was hoping I could talk her into a rain-check on that one, despite her usual insistence. Believe me, she could be one tough bill collector.

She faced the bunch of thugs again and said, “You’ve all been such dolls, haven’t you?”

After I’d slipped into the driver’s seat and gotten the Duck cranked, I could see Mosby sauntering over to her chopper and mounting it. “Now then,” she hollered over the sound of both engines going. “Just one more brisket for the barbie then. Bend over, you apes! Oo-ee! The moon she is a-shinin’ brightly tonight!”

28

Hanna

Boy, Babe! My woo-woo didn't see this one coming. Look at that big long trailer that truck's trying to move, and we can't go anywhere till he moves it out of the road. He keeps moving it one way then the other, then back again, then forward … Not again! Oh, babe! This is going to take all day. How can we get around him and catch up with Sweedee, if she's gone back to visit Hattie, and he keeps moving his trailer this way and that?

Sweedee sure does forget a lot of stuff and has to keep turning around like she does. It's like that time I left my homework at home and had to go back, but then, after getting to school again, I found out it was in my other notebook and had to go back and get it again.

And there goes that man again. He's still … Oh, goody! Looks like he's got it this time. Wow! For a minute there I thought he was going to give up and park it in the middle of the road and come back tomorrow. We'd have to sit here all night, if that happened.

"Finally!" Mama's saying, feeling as relieved as we are. "Maybe they haven't gotten that far ahead of us."

"It's only been a few minutes," Mister Jordan's saying.

"Few minutes? Seemed like an eternity. That guy needs more training. And of all the luck, him pulling out just as we're in a

hurry. I swear. People!"

"Strange, that their RV was going the other way. They could've been in Meridian by now, and we wouldn't have known it. Good eyes, Hanna! Wonder what made them turn around and come back."

It was Miss Mosby's woo-woo. She sensed Sweedee.

"Honey, that was just her being silly," Mama's saying. "She's probably someone who's into all that psychic nonsense. You know, tarot cards, horoscopes, maybe even Wicca for all we know."

Which-it? who's that?

"It's not a who, baby. It's … well, it's nothing you need to know about. She just thinks she has this special connection with nature and goes around making everybody believe what she's talking about. But with no scientific evidence to back it up, it's all just speculation."

Speck-you … What's that?

"Well, it's like … Wait a minute! Up there! Clese! See that RV coming into the highway?"

"Yep, I see it," Mister Jordan is saying. "They're headed back this way again."

"Well, isn't that something. It's like they don't know which way to go."

Babe, I can see it now. It's Sweedee, coming back this way. She must've figured she didn't forget after all.

Speck-you … Mama, think Sweedee specked us trying to find her, and she's playing tag or something?

"Honey, that's just too silly. There's no way they could've … Wait! The guy driving."

You know, Babe, I didn't see him before, when Sweedee was sticking her stickers. Her boyfriend?

"That's … it's really him!" Mama's hollering.

"Him who?" Mister Jordan's asking for both of us.

"Uh, I mean, there they go or went or … something. Anyway, let's not lose them this time."

"Just let me get turned around."

Wow, babe! Mister Jordan swung our car around like nothing, a whole lot faster than that guy with the trailer.

And there's Sweedee again, right in front of us now. And look. Some sort of writing on the back, like we saw before. It's all cursives. I don't know my cursives too well. I think it says, "S-double-u-e-e…" Sweedee! And she's "o-m? b-something-d" Somebody? Guess that means she's somebody. Boy, is she ever! Miss Mosby was right! And she didn't need any of that wick-it or speck-you stuff either.

"Well, Allie," Mister Jordan's saying. "We couldn't have gotten any luckier."

Mama seems excited, too. "I mean, come on! And who advertises themselves like that, letting the whole world know where they are? 'Sweedee on board'? She's like a child."

Babe, I hope none of her stickers came off, going back and forth like she did. She seemed real proud of it, too, like it was a school project. Makes me want to do something myself. I just need to get some stickers and find something I can put them on that'll make it look nice. You can help, too, Babe. If we get a good grade on it, maybe we'll get to congradulate together.

"Clese, stay with them. We don't want to … What the …?"

Look, Babe! There's a girl on a bike who just flew past and got in front of us.

"Of all the …!" Mama's not so excited anymore, is she? "Where'd she come from?"

Look, it's Miss Mosby! She must've fixed her chopper. And she rides a bike, too. And her long hair, it's just like a horse running. So cool!

"Hanna, sit down! What do you think, Clese? Think she let them onto us?"

"They must've been planning a meet-up, looks like."

"That means she knew all along. Woo-woo, my ass! It's over. Our cover's blown. Knew there was something funny about her. And just thinking about it, her with him, makes me …"

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just … Anyway, I still wish you'd have said something about seeing them before. I mean, I know I'm just a trainee, but come on, Clese! Put a little trust in me. Okay?"

"Allie, I … look, you've got those computer files, don't you? So, there's nothing more I can tell you than what you've got in hand al…"

"Clese, look out!"

Hold on, Babe! Wow, Mister Jordan got us stopped at that light real quick.

"Damn it, Clese!" Ooh, Mama's cussing and slapping the shelf. She's *really* mad at Miss Mosby now.

Mister Jordan's doing his breathing again. "Well, it was you who screamed, 'look out!' What else could I do?"

"Well, I didn't mean it to come out that way. Hanna, are you alright?"

I'm fine. Babe's fine, too.

"Just keep that seat-belt on, honey. Man! And there they go. First, that stupid trailer … and this darn light changing on us."

"Looked like they picked up speed, too," Mister Jordan's saying, "as soon as Miss Mosby went around and got ahead of them."

•

WE'RE OFF AGAIN. Boy, Babe. I can hardly see Sweedee anymore. It's just a speck way up there. Maybe that's what speck-you means: it's so far out, you can't tell what it is.

Mama sure got onto Mister Jordan for only doing what Mama told him to, stopping for that light. And that's why Sweedee is so hard to see now. It's almost like that bible story from Sunday school, about the mud in the eye, making it so you can't see to get the thing out of the other person's eye. Of course, all you have to do is wash the mud out, then you can see. I think if Sweedee is so far out like that, like a speck-you, maybe it's best that Mama and

Mister Jordan don't see her for now. That way, they'll be able to find her again, once she's gone. Does that make any sense to you, Babe? Guess not. You're just a ping-oo-win anyway.

Well, if Miss Mosby knows wick-it, like Mama says, which I figure is some kind of game, she sure did wick-it around Sweedee's trailer back there, like playing leap-frog. She rides a bike like nobody I've ever seen. She's like that cowboy in that movie we saw —only she's a girl, you see—out-running the wagon and stopping the horses before they got away. Except she's made the wagon go faster for some reason, like she's helping *them* get away. Maybe she thinks we're the bad men that stopped them this morning and made Sweedee get mad and chew on those ciguhrits. I'd get mad, too, only I would rather chew on candy than those. Yuck!

"I've lost sight of them now," Mister Jordan's saying.

Mama's getting her phone out. "Maybe if I call Missus North and let her know we've seen them, she'll call and talk them into stopping somewhere."

"I don't know, Allie. That's kind of cheating, isn't it? I mean, what reason would she give? They might get suspicious and drive on, or turn off somewhere and we'd really lose them."

"Either way, we should probably let her know." Mama's punching the phone buttons.

But Mister Jordan's reaching over and stopping her. "Better to wait till they call her, then let her call us. I don't want to force anything, if we can avoid it."

Well, Babe, we've been riding and riding and no sight of them yet. I hate that it's upsetting Mama so. She's gone back to snacking hard, only this time it's what we were able to bag up from dinner at that place. We were in such a hurry to catch Sweedee. Wonder if Sweedee got to eat dinner, too, or what does she eat if anything. Can't be just ciguhrits. Bet they've got all kinds of food in that trailer. If so, she wouldn't have to stop anywhere. We may never get to catch up with them then.

Not much to see out here, is there, Babe? It's just mostly woods

and hills.

"Hanna?" Mama's talking to us, Babe. "You doing OK back there?"

Yeah, Mama, I'm fine. Babe, too. Just kind of bored, that's all.

"Well, we'll be back home soon. Just have to stop in Birmingham for a little bit. Won't be long."

The country's starting to open up again. And look, there's a train following us, too. Look's like Mister Jordan is trying to keep up with it, don't it? See all that funny writing on those train cars, Babe? I know you can't read, but I think they're saying something, though it's hard to tell with the sun in my eyes and the letters being all drawn in weird shapes and such. Almost like cartoons, don't it? Must be different people using the train to carry their letters everywhere, just like Sweedee does. Only Sweedee's writing is prettier, and in a pretty blue, too. And with that train, it doesn't matter where it comes from or where it goes, everybody gets to see the cartoons they made. So, Sweedee must think to do the same thing, talking to people along the way, while the coming-from and going-to parts she keeps to herself.

And there's a big field over there with a plane trying to land on it. Looks like they've got other planes there, too. It's not as big as the one in Atlanta where we got on a plane. Wonder if we caught a plane from here, would it take us home. But guess not, since we still have Sweedee to catch before then.

It's getting boring again. I don't know about you, Babe, but I'm already hungry, too.

"Looks like Meridian coming up," Mister Jordan's saying.

"Clese, we should just go ahead and take the interstate and make up some time, don't you think? I mean, no sense in trying to stay on this two-lane all the way."

Mama's phone's playing its music now. "Oh, there's Missus North … Yes, hello … He did? Oh, that's so good to hear! What? Not those jerks again … Well, glad they were able to get away. Actually, we saw them a while back but lost them again. We're just

going to go ahead to Birmingham and wait there. We met someone who told us where his place is. But keep us informed if anything changes."

"What was that about *those jerks*?" Mister Jordan's asking.

"Well, looks like the two thugs from this morning showed up again, with their boss, and hijacked the RV, then dropped the guy Chris and Miss Feathers off back in Laurel. Then for some reason, they came back to get them, but somehow Chris and Miss Feathers managed to get the RV back and get away. That explains the back and forth fiasco, doesn't it? But what I don't understand is …"

"Why they let go the two of them to begin with?" Mister Jordan's finishing for Mama. "They could've taken Miss Feathers and turned her in. Makes no sense to me, either. And why they came back …"

"It's like they couldn't make up their minds," Mama's saying. "Anyway, someone was really looking out for those two."

It was. It was Miss Mosby, Mama. She must've went to save them from those bad guys. She's tough. They must've ran off, too, when she showed them her aydee-tree gun.

"You know, Hanna," Mister Jordan is saying, "Like you, I kind of like this Mosby woman. I'm figuring, too, she helped them out. Still, this cat and mouse game has got to come to an end."

"You're right," says Mama, "sooner the better. Although I still don't hold as high opinion as you two do of the wonderful Miss Mosby. Woo-woo or not, she's on their side. Just hope she's not leading them into a trap. Because if she is, big gun or no, I'm not letting her … I mean, we shouldn't let her, you know, get in the way or … whatever."

Mama's really chomping on those chicken tenders now. I've never seen her this riled up before.

And Mister Jordan's sighing, too. It's what he does when he thinks Mama's getting ahead of him, or ahead of herself. "Allie, I've got to warn you. We can't let this get personal, you understand? Our job is done, once Miss Feathers is in custody. If we can aid in

some way, so be it. This is business, remember? Not a vendetta."

"Sorry. I don't know what I'm thinking sometimes."

Now Mama's sighing, too, and laying off the chicken tenders. She must be tired of getting ahead of both herself and Mister Jordan. "Clese, I have to confess something. I met the same guy, Chris whatever, back in that store where we stopped. Honestly, I didn't know it was him. We talked for a good bit. But when that … *woman* said she knew him, it kind of made me … well, I don't know. I'm more worried about him than Miss Feathers now. She could try to manipulate him somehow, and that's what's had me worried. That's it. Satisfied?"

Mister Jordan's looking over at Mama for some reason. He must be worried, too. "Allie, you're not, uh, attracted to the North guy, are you?"

"What? Me? No way. I mean, I … what … what were you thinking I said?"

"Well, you were saying all kinds of stuff there, which made me think you've become more focused on him than on Miss Feathers. Did he come onto you or something?"

"Clese, that's not how it is. I mean, the guy's not bad looking, I'll grant that. But after Jack, I swore I'd never get involved with another man. The fact that I … well, just like you said, business is business. Besides, I can barely even remember his name. So there. Satisfied now?"

Babe, this is getting kind of int'risting. Mama got onto me for talking to Sweedee, but she went and talked to that guy who Miss Mosby knew and … Yep, real int'risting. I don't know about you, but I think she's jealous of Miss Mosby. If that's the case, we're gonna have more trouble with the guy than with Sweedee, from here on out. Real int'risting, don't you think?

29

Chris

As soon as we got outside Laurel Mosby passed us on her bike and motioned for me to keep up with her. Not knowing what this plan of hers was, I figured I'd play along till either she fessed up or I could see my way to saying, "See ya," and mount the Duck for parts beyond.

Mosby soon picked up speed, but the Duck, as usual, was not as responsive to such quick changes of pace. This was one of the reasons I'd wanted to take the interstates, where I could set cruise control and take my sweet time in the passing lane. But on these two-lanes, there remained the chance of getting behind some slow-poke and not finding a safe passing point for miles. We eventually caught up with the biker chick though, just as she was signaling for me to make a right turn.

Sweedee had taken the passenger side again and started up her usual after-dinner smoke. "What is she, showing us a shortcut? You plan on following her, I take it."

"Mosby's instincts are pretty spot on," I assured her. "She must think we need a break before moving on. I for one could use a breather after that fiasco back there."

"No kidding. Well, I have to say she's alright, kind of a groovy gal to have around in a pinch. And this country out here is not half

bad either, sort of idyllic and … quiet. Nice place to retire, if I had something to retire from."

Like Sweedee said, the country out that way, though just as much country as all the other country we'd been driving through, had a more peaceful relaxed feel to it. We were on a narrow blacktop now, far off the main thoroughfare, winding past tree-lined open fields fronted by an occasional cottage or ranch-style house with a lawn dotted with shrubs and shade trees. Unlike back on Greenwell Springs Road, there was hardly any traffic either way. One home sat opposite a nice sized pond, while another had a white wooden fence running around a spacious piece of well-kept grassland. I spotted a few fishing ponds, which in themselves made things especially inviting enough. I was already wondering why Mosby had chosen this particular route to lead us down, when she slowed and pulled off onto a graveled drive which wound through a clearing planted with crepe myrtles.

The drive ended at a wide one-story brick home lined with a large picture window on one side and a few smaller double-hung ones on the other. Like Twin Cedars, it had a full-length front porch, but instead of weathered cedar, yellow terracotta tiles lined the roof. The place had sort of a Western flavor to it, even sporting a horse railing and an old clapboard wagon sitting out front. Through some trees off to the left, I could see a large pond backed up against a wooded area. With the day nearing its end, the sun sat low behind the trees, with the deepening sky reflected in the pond's darkened water. In fact, the whole place had entered the cool shade of an early twilight, once we'd pulled up and parked.

A tall stocky dude came out of the house and onto the porch. He was dressed in a polo shirt over dark slacks and had brown curly hair and beard, all with spots of gray mixed in. He stood there, smiling and waving to us.

"G'day to ya!" he hollered. "Mighty fine weather we're having, isn't it?"

Mosby had parked and dismounted her Harley and was walking

toward the old dude, arms extended. He stepped off the porch, and they both proceeded to hug each other.

"Well there, Sherry dear," he said. "Who're you bringing to see your old uncle Drew this evening?"

"Please, Unk," I could hear her whispering to him, "you're not supposed to use it, least not in front of others."

"Oh, so you did tell me," he replied. "But surely these fine folks are friends of yours. Why should it hurt none?"

I piped up, "She won't even let me call her …"

"Put a handle on it, North!" Mosby uttered.

"And who might this young fella be?" Drew said. "Not the very one you went after, I take it? Why, you lassoed him good, and brought with him another fine specimen of womanhood. Would you be his mother, deary?"

"Hardly," Sweedee said. "Name's Sweedee. Though I liked the lassoed part. The kid needs a little taking hold of every now and then."

Drew let out a loud belly laugh at that one. Even Mosby let out a good one. I for my part was left scratching my head at why I needed to be lassoed.

"Well then, Miss Sweedee," said Drew. "You and your stray there can sally on in here. My Sher… pardon, my niece here must know you both to be good people, else she'd have not been so shy with me before. Don't take her roughness for meanness. After all, she was born and reared in the outback down under. But she has a good heart none-the-least."

Drew led us all inside, into a large sitting area circled with various low-seated chairs and a massive oak table in the middle. A pair of deer antlers draped with moss and some lighted antique lanterns hung over the tabletop. The ceiling itself was opened up, with a couple of ceiling fans twirling away slowly. A bar stood off to one side with two shelves stacked with assorted bottles of liquor, while the other wall was hung with rifles, swords and some paintings. Sweedee was naturally drawn to the paintings.

“You folks make yourselves to home,” Drew said, “while I head to the kitchen for a bit.”

Mosby had already plopped down in one of the chairs near the picture window. It was made from pieces of driftwood and cushioned with some type of animal skin.

“Take a load off, North,” she said to me. “You, too there, Miss Sweedee.”

Sweedee was still eyeing one of the paintings, squinting real close at it, actually. It showed some mountains surrounding a lake reflecting gold-tinged clouds from above.

“This is an original Thomas Moran,” she said. “I wrote a paper on him once. His detail is exquisite, down to the leaves on the trees and the moss on the boulders. And there’s that predominance of red ocher pervading the whole atmosphere. Incredible! You know, his works helped to make Yellowstone into a national park. How did your uncle come across such a fine piece, I wonder?”

Mosby replied, “Unk was making real good money back in the day as a steel fitter. Where most fellas spent theirs on trucks and boats and swimming pools, Drew Gleason decided it best to invest his in old pictures and antiquaries.”

“I get what you’re saying,” I said. “This place makes me feel like I’ve been transported back about a hundred years or so.”

“Slow and quiet were those days,” Mosby said with a sigh. “Good place to escape to, eh, North?” She reached out and stroked my forearm and gripped its hand. “What’s say you and I take a walk around the lake, shall we?” She was already up and dragging me toward the front door.

Drew appeared with a tray full of cups and said, “What? No coffee? Just don’t go doing anything I wouldn’t, though I certainly wouldn’t with none other than your sweet Aunt Georgie, bless her. Now there was a piece.”

“Piece of what?” Mosby asked back.

“Oh, go on, the two of ya. Ay, Miss Sweedee there. Care for a cup of joe, would ya?”

Sweedee's eyes lit up at that one, leaving the fine painting behind her.

A cup of joe would've done me some good, too, if I weren't being lassoed at the moment by a demented woman in leather boots.

°

"YOU'RE uncle's kind of cool," I told her once we'd gotten outside. "Sort of reminds me of my uncle Mack."

We were sauntering across the yard, toward where the pond's edge sloped, our hands joined and swinging together.

Mosby said, "My Aunt Georgie, bless her, has been gone for four years now, and he still misses her. I've taken him out with me to Mott's a few times, but to no avail. He keeps to hisself more than a fella should, you know? Now, I know what you're thinking, that I wanted to turn him onto your friend and all. But you're wrong. It just turned out that way somehow, …"

She then backed me against a tree and pressed her body against mine. "… like it usually does, eh, North?" Mosby brought her lips close to mine, but then paused, gave a pout and slapped my shoulder. I mean, really hard, too. "Damn you, Chris!" She then slipped away, turned and took a cross-armed stand, staring across the pond.

"Believe me," I said. "There's nobody else. Honest."

"You can't hide it from me, North. You met someone, and your heart's all twisted up like fencing wire. I know I said some nasty things back there when you went to bury your dad and all, but I was hoping you were coming back to give us another chance. I meant it, when I said I wanted to get lost with you. Now, you're wanting to high tail it before you even got settled. I can tell. If I could just get you to forget that old road and the gigs and all that waywardness …"

I went and stood beside her, looking out at the water. The far

bank was slightly steep and lined with pine trees. It'd be a good spot to sit, sipping beer and casting a line out over the water. In my envisioning such, that could've been Mosby sitting there beside me. Or someone else, maybe? Why was it so hard to forget that one, I wondered, meaning the chick I'd seen at that truck stop. There was no way we'd ever cross paths again, I was sure of it. And here was one standing right next to me, ready to throw away everything for my sake. I had to have been the crazy one.

"Look," I said, "I promised Sweedee I'd take her back to Atlanta, and that's about it. After that, well, I've gotta hit the road with the band for a few weeks, just to make enough to pay my rent. Then after that … I don't know. I tend to play things by ear, you know? It's just how I've spent my life up to now. Of course, with the way things have been going, I'm not even sure why I'm headed to Atlanta in the first place, except some jerk-offs have been chafing my hide all day, making me want to run them all off a cliff somewhere. I thought I was helping Sweedee out, but all it's gotten me is deeper into crap than a guy should have to take. I mean, what's the payoff? I can't even show Daddy's paintings anymore."

"I can tell why you did it," Mosby said. "There's no mistaking it."

"Oh, you and your woo-woo again. So, what is it this time?"

"You're stuck, Chris. Stuck between two cushions and a dream. You're a dreamer. They say don't fall in love with one. I was such an arse to go and dare to. Still, you're serving a greater purpose than you know. Don't go shoving that off for a silly dream now. People are counting on you. One of them's on your tail right now, matter of fact."

"Yeah, and who …?"

But Mosby had already turned and was headed back to the house.

And that line she'd given me: *Stuck between two cushions and a dream*. Like she'd reached into my mind and retrieved that line I'd almost forgotten about. So, I reached in my pocket and added it to

the other words I'd scribbled and been hacking away at. It fit perfectly, too. For some reason, I then forgot everything else she'd said and was hard at it with the words to that song I'd started at the hotel. Dreamer, for sure.

I read over the title I'd come up with, "The Never-ending Road." Then that line,

> *… one more mile to go,*
> *but we don't know where.*

And what was the road? Not a place, but a way. It was always taking me this way and that way, without giving a place, a place I could call my own.

I sat on the grass, glancing at the stillness of the pond, jotting down more words as they came. At some point, I'd have to clean things up and tighten up the lyrics, if I wanted a finished product.

It was getting close to dark. I wanted to get into Birmingham as soon as could. Birmingham. Back to that little trailer of mine. Maybe I really was just a dreamer … or a real jerk of a fool for letting Mosby go.

I could hear her start up her bike and heading back down the drive.

That's me, Chris "Jerk of an Idiot" North.

"Someone's after me?" I said. "Where'd she get that one from?"

30

Sweedee

5:31 PM FRI

I tell you, Ruby. If that bunch of yo-yos didn't go and make such a mess in my movable house. And to go and eat up all my spare doughnuts, too. Should've shot them, when I had the chance—at least, before North's girlfriend slipped the gun out of my hand. And she did it pretty smooth, too, without me even knowing it, can you believe it? Gotta hand it to her. Guess I'm getting too old for that kind of stuff anymore anyway. But speaking of taking out the trash …

Let's see. Where to start?

"Hallo!"

Oh, uh … Hugh, is it?

"Drew. Thought I'd come and help you clean your place. Yikes! It's a mess in here. Well, let me at it. I'll start in the back and work my way forward."

Suit yourself. Man, it certainly is such a mess up here alright.

Anyhoo, Ruby. As soon as I'm done and can drag the kid away from his playtime, we're gonna get the kaboodles out of here. And once we're on the road, I'm gonna take a real good nap, especially after downing that grub and going through all the excitement

afterwards. I deserve it, you know?

"Were you talking to me just now?"

Huh? Oh, uh, no. Just … talking to … nobody. I do that sometimes. You done already?

"Yep. Anything up front you need a hand with?"

Oh, no, I'm good. Hm, looks like you didn't do half bad back there. You're kind of … thorough.

"It's one of the things I was always taught to do as a fitter, cleaning up as you go. You know, come to think of it, that's life, isn't it? It's like you're running down a hallway, trying to pick up as much stuff as you can before you have to head for the exit. Instead, why not just straighten up whatever you can and be done with it? The rest can just handle itself, you know?"

Yeah, not a bad idea. You ever heard the one about yogurt?

"Yogurt? Yeah, I guess it's not so bad … sometimes."

It's not like it used to be though. Remember it? How they put the good part down at the bottom, so you had to turn the thing over and cut the bottom off to get to it?

"Well, why not forget about buying the stuff and just spend your money on the good part?"

Exactly!

"…"

…

Well … Guess we, uh …

"Yeah, I just, you know …"

Sure thing … and … thanks.

"Don't mention it. Well, best go check on those two before I wind up with a grand-niece."

Oh, North can handle himself.

"Or she could. If it were me, well, …"

Well, what?

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to imply … uh-hum! So, better, you know, … "

Yeah, I know already. So, um … Hey, looks like your niece is

already taking off kind of early.

"Well, she does come and go as she pleases. She moved over here to be near me after her mom died. Never knew her dad. She pretty much does her own thing now. No bother to me."

Hm. Wonder what North might've said to make her high-tail it like that.

"Well, considering it was him she'd gone after, I reckon he let her know he'd found some other gal. The young thing, bless her heart! Oh, but I best be leaving you to yourself then. You'll probably be wanting to … not that I'm trying to run you off, you see."

Yeah, I see, too. And you're not, really.

"But if you ever, you know, need something else done, like …"

Like?

"Uh-hum! Well, take care then."

Yeah, you, too. Hey! They say knowledge is a dangerous thing, you know.

"Heh-heh! Good one."

Yeah. Heh-eh. Eh … Hm. Not too swift, is he? Rats!

5:48 PM FRI

Aah! what was I thinking, Ruby? Letting him go with nothing but a thanks. Thanks? Thanks? Couldn't add anything else, like maybe "a lot" or "you were a big help" or "with all my heart" or "maybe we could …?" But, no. Just thanks.

And he'd gone and made a cup of coffee for me even. For me! And what do I say? Thanks?

He'd even promised me a tour of his collection. But what does old Sweedee say? Thanks, some other time?

Damn you, Smiley! Men! If Vent were still around, it'd be different. Wouldn't be having some other guy getting me to feel this way. It's hard sometimes, Ruby, without somebody … like him. But what do I know about men? I mean, I could've had the guy. Well,

maybe for one night. But what did old Sweedee leave him with? Thanks! Thanks for what? For making this old heart go pitter-patter again? Would go and bang my head against the TV, if it weren't so high up there.

Still, it was sweet of him, wasn't it?

Yeah. Real sweet.

31

Chris

Before we left his place, Mosby's Uncle Drew showed me how to get back to the highway, by just following the same road we were on. He said that I should go ahead and take I-20 to Birmingham, since the two-lanes up that way after dark were not the safest of routes. He seemed to stress the matter out of a particular concern for Sweedee's safety, a little fact I held onto for the off-chance I needed some valid excuse for bucking her usual injunctions. As it turned out, however, Miss Doughnut Queen decided to pay a visit to snoozeville, soon after we pulled out—which was fine by me.

I figured it high-time I updated Lynn on our recent debacle, especially since it served to incriminate a certain little tease sitting at the front desk of North Brothers. Not surprisingly, Lynn was furious and promised—no, assured me—that she'd be giving Vent Junior a good tongue-lashing. That I would've paid to see.

At Meridian, I pulled into an RV park to empty the waste tank and refill the water tank. Judging by the meters in the dash, as well as Sweedee's persistent usage of the bath area now starting to leave a lingering odor, this was as good a time as any to freshen things up and lighten the load. After checking that everything else was nice and snug, including looking in on Miss Dream Girl on the bed in back, I took the Duck and made the jump onto I-20.

We hit the outskirts of Birmingham within half an hour's time. By that point, some mountains of the lower Appalachian range were coming into view, stretched out like recumbent giants in the fading light of evening. Lighted business signs of various shapes and colors stood scattered along either side of that busy stretch of four-lanes, hovering like spacecraft against the dark eastern sky. This was West Birmingham, with its little suburban outposts of Hueytown, Concord, Pleasant Grove and Rock Creek.

Normally, I would've taken the 19th street exit and headed up several blocks into Hueytown, to the neighborhood of Norwood Estates, somewhere in the back of which my rinky-dink trailer stood tucked away awaiting my return. However, with the place presumably under a stake-out that evening, I bypassed the exit and kept going till I hit the I-65 interchange which took us down to where it exited near the Birmingham Arena, home of the Ingots. I decided we'd park there for the night, next to one edge of the arena's huge lot where other RV'ers usually set up their own little community of tailgaters for whenever the Ingots had a home-game. Actually, a good number of these were already lined up for that night's game between the Ingots and the Pacers. I really wanted to see that one, too. After spotting her up from her nap and having her obligatory cup of mud, I talked Sweedee into joining me. Fortunately, to save footwork, we were able to catch one of the shuttles as it was making its rounds of the vehicle-crammed lot.

Unfortunately, when we got up to the entrance, it turned out the game was already in progress, with every seat booked and taken—sort of a replay of that dream I'd had back at Twin Cedars, strangely. However, just when I thought my evening was about to devolve into having to crash on the sofa and catch the action on the dish, a nice looking convertible pulled up to the curb and honked.

"North?" the driver hollered. "It is you. What's cooking, partner?" It was that oil tycoon who'd given us his suite back at the Baton Rouge Hilton. And once again, the lady in the passenger side was no where near the age of Missus Tycoon, rather nearer to my

age, actually.

“Hey man!” I said. “Fancy seeing y’all here. We were going to go watch the game, but looks like it’s sold out.”

“Well, partner, guess this is your lucky day. I happen to have these two tickets on me. Let me see … Here you go, partner. We changed our minds at the last minute. You know how it is. Right, baby?”

“Duncan honey, baby’s hungry. Can we go eat now?” Little Miss Baby then flashed us a grin.

“Well, much obliged, sir,” I said. “Thank you so much.”

“Sure thing, partner. Oh, and again, so sorry to hear about your daddy. Y’all enjoy the game now.”

“Byeee!” said Miss Baby, wiggling her fingers at us.

After they sped off, I looked at the tickets and found that they were for a booth up in the upper suite area. Woe, Nelly! That meant I wouldn’t have to fight with squeezing passed the legs of grumbling fans in the bleachers below.

For Sweedee’s part, seemed they didn’t allow smoking up there. And with the time outs coming more often than not throughout the first half, things didn’t quite live up to what she considered first-class entertainment. So, she opted to leave me to my pleasure and head back to the comforts of the Duck.

At the half, they sponsored a drawing to see who could sink a free throw in each of three tries. One of the cheerleaders for the Ingots drew the ticket stub and spelled out the number into a microphone. I pulled out the two from my pants pocket. Mine was a no go, but the one for Sweedee’s seat matched the number. Woe, Nelly, one more time! I stood up and started waving that ticket.

“And looks like we have our contestant, y’all,” the cheerleader shouted. “Would the gentleman please come down to the court and show the referee his ticket?”

After they’d confirmed the match, I was handed a b-ball and escorted over to the scrimmage line.

“Now, you’ve got three shots, son,” the dude told me. “You just

have to make all three baskets to win."

"What's the prize?" I asked, getting a feel for the ball.

"Sink all three, and you get a hundred bucks and season tickets to next year's home games."

"Woo-hoo! Sounds great to me."

"Good luck, son. Everybody's rooting for you."

Fans were cheering, cameras were flashing. For some reason the goal seemed farther away than I remembered. But I figured that had more to do with the size of the arena and the bright lighting. The crowd simmered down, as I dribbled, kissed the ball for luck and prepared for that first shot.

Crowds cheering. Lights flashing. It all took me back again to that dream I'd had back at the Hilton, before I woke up the next morning to a thunderstorm and a long drive in the rain. But this was obviously not a dream, let me tell you, and there were no clouds overhead either. It was just that nice clear shot between me and the prize.

Need I reiterate, at this crucial point, how much trouble it'd been getting on the basketball team in high school. Not only was I too short—something which shouldn't have counted against me at try-outs, but oh, well—but I'd never really reviewed the rules of the game and wound up making too many blunders to convince the coach I was ready. Even so, I did practice on my own every weekend, always with the hope of eventually being chosen for a slot. Then came my senior year, when I and Mason Hampton formed our own little duo and nearly won the championship. Thus, I felt like I was really up to it now. Luck had finally turned my way. What was there to spoil it, except a missed shot maybe. But I wasn't about to let myself get psyched-out by that notion. No sir!

Crowds cheering. Lights flashing. I'd sunk the ball on the first try. Go Ingots! That left the second one. I knew I shouldn't over-think things. If I missed, I was out. If I got it, there would be that third and last chance, the last hurdle to the prize awaiting me. That's what I needed to aim for.

Over on the side-lines stood a group of Ingots cheerleaders, cheering me on—all of them rather good looking, too. For an instant, I pictured myself receiving the prize and getting a kiss from each and every one of them. Wouldn't that have put the cherry topping on my ego! Woe, baby, for sure!

I did the dribble, the kiss, took aim and …

Crowds cheering. Lights flashing. One particular flash hit me straight in the corneas, and suddenly the basket vanished.

Still, I let the ball fly. Hit or miss, Chris! This was it.

Cheering turned to moaning. Camera flashes diminished.

I covered my face with both hands. In my mind, I could even hear Vent Junior saying, "Nice try, cream pie!"

And in my heart, there arose those final lines from that old poem I'd memorized as a child and hoped I'd never have to live:

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout,
But there is no joy in Birmingham—mighty Chris has struck out.

32

Hanna

Maybe it looks like we're here. At least, that's what Mama and Mister Jordan have figured.

"Allie, is this it?"

"This is the address she gave us. The trailer looks like no one lives in it, though."

Those were a lot of turns we had to make back there. First, we got off the inner-stake, and you could see a small mountain over yonder. It wasn't all dark yet, but people had their car lights on anyway. We kept climbing hill after hill most of the way. Seems all the houses were on the sides of hills—you know, how they're higher on one end than the other. Going up all those hills must get tiring. Bet they're all glad to get back home. I know we will.

But Mister Jordan seemed to know where he was going, and he didn't seem to get that tired. Guess that comes from him being a police officer, having to find where all the cranimals live to catch them. Mama always said it's best to catch them by surprise, so they don't have a chance to run away. But this place we've come to doesn't look nothing like what Sweedee would live in, unless Miss Mosby fooled us. And I don't think she would do that.

"I'm gonna head over to Birmingham PD," Mister Jordan is saying to Mama. "You sure you want me to leave you and Hanna

here alone?"

"Don't worry about us. I know how to get in."

"Fingerprint kit. Lock-picking kit. Is there anything in your purse that's not illegal?"

"My pepper spray?"

"Remind me not to run into you in a dark alley."

"Clese, I'd never do you any harm. Just let me know it's you, before I open the door, okay?"

"Is there a password I should use?"

"Just say, '*Allie, open up*.' That should keep you safe."

I don't know, Babe. This place looks like a dump, nothing like the trailer Sweedee rides around in. Hope the inside's not as dirty as the outside, or we may have to camp out under that tree.

Mama's working real hard jimminying the lock.

"Hanna, best cover your ears, honey. This is a lot tougher than I thought. I may have to apply some choice cuss-words to loosen the tumblers on this one."

Sorry, Babe. I don't have enough hands to cover your ears, too. Just sing to yourself, okay?

"There! Got it! Woo-hoo! Still got the touch, Allie baby. Now, where's the light switch?"

Really, Babe. It's not too bad in here, though it does smell a bit. It's really warm, too. Mama's getting the AC going, to cool things down.

"Wait right here, honey. I'm going to check the mail box."

There's a nice sized TV, Babe, almost as big as ours. We'll have to find a garbage can for all these beer cans on the table. I'll get the one from the kitchen. Pee-yew! Don't want to use that one. Here's a shopping bag. Let's use it.

"Okay," Mama's back and saying. "It's the right address alright. All the mail's addressed to Chris North. I better check the bathroom before I let you use the toilet, honey. This is a man's place, after all."

There, all done. I'll just put it in the corner. Now, let's sit here

till Mama's done cleaning the bathroom. Knowing her, it may take a while.

Wonder where the cartoons are on this TV. Let's see.

"Only 19.99 for these gorgeous earrings, girls."

Pretty, but too expressive.

"Another beautiful day outside, with temps staying in the seventies. But we could see some rain moving into the metro area by tomorrow afternoon."

And we didn't bring a un-brillo either. Maybe if Sweedee shows up, she'll let us share hers.

"99 down, 99 a month."

Sure is a lot of stuff costing nine and nine for some reason. Guess that means nine plus nine, which is … Never mind. But why don't they just say, 'nine plus nine', instead of something silly like 'nine tee nine'? Must be a rip-off.

"On tonight's X-files, starting at seven: 'Mulder, you're not serious about this, are you?' 'Trust me, Scully, this one's for real this time.'"

That one looks scary. And Mama says stay away from anything that's rated X, whatever X stands for. Must mean it's extra scary. I wouldn't be able to sleep.

Oh, Mama's done now.

"Okay, honey. Bathroom's ready if you need it. Just don't open the hamper or look in the shower. Here, I saved you some snacks. Just keep it down, while I have a look around. Wonder if there's a picture of him somewhere. Probably some with him and that Mosby woman. Just wondering how close they really were."

Look, Babe. It's the Cartoon Network. We hit the jack-spot.

Mama's over there looking at that wall. "The guy's got a lot of pictures, that's for sure, with all kinds of people. Don't see her yet though. Wait a minute! Is that Sonny Talcum? It is. Oh my gosh! The guy knows Sonny Talcum. He's like one of my favorite singers."

Looks like Mama's hit the jack-spot, too, Babe. Haven't known her to like someone so much as this guy Chris. He's Sweedee's

friend, so he must be a good guy. She needs a good guy in her life. And I need to use the bathroom now. Stay here, Babe. And don't change the channel, okay?

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Mama! someone's knocking at the door.

She's gone down the hall. Think she heard me, Babe?

Mama?

"I'm coming. Oh, someone's at the door. Could be Clese. Who is it?"

"Allie, it's me."

Sounds like Mister Jordan, but Mama's not sure.

"Tsk! That's not the password we agreed on."

"We never agreed on anything. You know it's me."

"I distinctly heard you ask, 'what's the password?' And didn't I tell you?"

"Alright then! Allie, open up."

"There you go. That's all you needed to say."

Mister Jordan's making those breathing noises like he sometimes does. It was still kind of funny though, watching two grown-ups play. When I get grown-up, you'll still play with me, won't you, Babe? We can get Sweedee to join us, since by then she'll probably be out of jail. That is, if she does go to jail. I don't think she should, knowing how Mister Jordan's talking.

"I spoke with Sam Westwood," he's saying now. "He partnered with me the last year before I retired from Atlanta PD. He's chief detective at a substation here in Birmingham. Turns out, they already have a warrant issued for Feathers' arrest."

"I hate that it has to come to that," Mama's saying. "They should probably go after those thugs who threatened them back in Laurel. That would lead them to the main crooks, don't you think?"

"To be honest, Allie, I'm hoping they find her first. You see, I'm still not convinced she was involved. But for some reason, the

Syndicate wanted to frame her for the thefts, then changed their minds for some reason. She'd be safer in police custody."

"And she could serve as state's witness to bring the hammer down on the whole operation. I see your point."

"Well, anyway, Sam promised to inform me as soon as they bring her in. In the meantime, I need to put my head down and get a little shut-eye."

"Fine by me. I'm going to chill a little myself and have a look at these files, like you suggested."

Mama, they're not going to hurt Sweedee, are they?

"No, honey. They'll just keep her there till they can catch the real bad guys. Go on and finish watching your cartoons. Things will work out alright for Miss Feathers."

Well, Babe, it looks like we're locked out once more. Mister Jordan's taking a nap, while Mama's snacking some more and looking at her pooter. And what are we left with? Watching more cartoons. There's got to be something better on.

"Just keep it down, honey," Mama's saying. "Let's see. Wait! Haven't seen this one before. How did I miss it? Says she was kept in a hospital for a while, for some kind of procedure, and was visited by two uniformed patrolmen. And one of them was … Clese Jordan? And the other? My dad?! And the reason? Sexual assault? Clese didn't tell me anything about this one. And yet, he acted like he hadn't met her before."

Babe, forget TV. What Mama's reading about sounds much more int'risting. But wonder what sesal salt is? Is it something Sweedee ate that made her sick that she had to go to the hospital? If so, we better stay away from that stuff. And sounds like Mister Jordan really does know Sweedee.

"That's funny," Mama's saying. "Says she was admitted under the name Ethel. Wonder what that was about."

Sweedee was Ethel? Maybe Sweedee is just her nickname, like how everybody calls my friend Janie Miller "Sissy". I asked her, "Why do they call you Sissy?" And she said, "That's from when I

was a baby, my older sister called me that." So someone must've called Ethel "Sweedee" for some reason. Maybe because she's … sweet? No. Ooh, I know. It's like that bird in the cartoon. What's it called? Tweedy! Yeah, and it's always tricking the cat Sylvesser. So, maybe that's where. Sweedee's always tricking the bad people who are after her, making them look like fools. She's the bird, and they're the cats. That's why they have to put her in jail, to keep the cats from eating her. It all makes sense now, Babe. Well, maybe.

Enough of cartoons. Oh, this is int'risting. There's a guy getting ready to play basketball in front of all those people. They let him play by himself? Ooh! He got one. Looks like they're going to let him try another.

"What's that you're watching, honey?"

Some guy playing basketball.

"Just one guy? That's weird. What happened to the rest of the … Hold on! Can't be. That's … that's him! Oh, my gosh! Clese … no, I can't wake him. I've gotta check this out for myself. Honey, Mama's going out for a bit."

Can I come?

"You stay here with Mister Jordan. I've … gotta go meet someone."

•

MAMA'S in a real hurry to go meet someone. Wonder who that is? Better ask before she gets in the car.

Mama, what do I tell Mister Jordan?

"When he wakes up, tell him I went to the store. No, that would be a lie. Don't want you to have to lie for me. Tell him, I went to meet a friend and will be back soon. Yeah, that's closer to the truth."

Look, Babe. Someone's coming. It's Miss Mosby on her bike. Wow! She looks so cool on that thing.

"What do you want?" Mama's asking her, in kind of a mean

way, too. Is she still mad with Miss Mosby?

"Thought I'd check to see if you made it," Miss Mosby's saying. "Looks like. You must've found out then."

"Found out what?"

"You know what I'm getting at, luv. You wanted to know if me and North were still an item. Well, you've been inside, I take it. Saw for yourself. No shots of us together. Know why? 'Cause I took them all and burned them. That's what you were after, wasn't it?"

Mama's crossing her arms. "Did your so-called woo-woo tell you that?"

Miss Mosby's making her bike into a seat, leaning against it, cross-armed, too. "That and … that he's over me, too. It's you, isn't it?"

Mama's laughing at that one. Was it a joke? I don't get it, Babe. All this grown-up talk is confusing me.

"You're putting me on," Mama's saying. "I don't even know the guy."

"But you've met. Eh? That's all it took. That's all it bloody took, to turn his heart."

"Listen, I don't know what you're insinuating, but I have no feelings whatsoever for Chris North. Sorry, lady. You're barking up the wrong tree. If you'll excuse me, I have somewhere to be right now."

Miss Mosby's letting her arms drop and looking kind of sad now. Wonder what's wrong? "You're such a fool, saying that."

"Pardon?"

"And after you went and stole his heart. Damn you!"

"Hey, now! What are *you* saying? That he has a crush on me? Yeah, right. That would make him the fool, don't you think?"

"And wouldn't it make you the … no, I'm not going to mark you that way. Wouldn't be fair. But you're lying to yourself. You see, he didn't do it for me."

"Do what?" Mama's asking.

"Coming back, like he did. Oh, for her, too. But that's just it. He

did it for the both of ya. Sort of a Saint Nick there, and without a clue about it worth saving his bum."

Wow! She even looks cool getting back on her bike as she does getting off.

"Who are you talking about?" Mama's asking. "You mean, her? And me? That makes no sense."

"Someday, I pray it will."

There goes Miss Mosby. And there's Mama, looking kind of confused herself, watching her ride off. Can't see anything now but the red light on back of her bike. Wonder if we'll ever get to see her again.

And who do you suppose she was talking about, Babe?

"I must be a fool," Mama's saying. "I'm about to make the stupidest mistake of my life."

And there goes Mama. I know I'll see her again. But will she be the same person. Oh, Babe. My woo-woo is all screwed up right now.

33

Sweedee

6:37 PM FRI

I tell you, Ruby, that was a good nap. Despite all that whoopty-do we had to go through earlier, this has turned out to be one of my best days ever. Really wish it wouldn't end, but it's bound to at some point. Can't keep making the kid haul this old broad around forever. I mean, he's got a life, doesn't he? Wouldn't be fair to hold him back from that. Been wondering if I should just disappear again like before. Don't know where or how, but it shouldn't be long.

Just before I dozed off, I heard North phoning and talking to the sweet one about how those yahoos shanghaied us, and how little Miss Ponytails was behind it. Apparently, Junior's about to get a good kick in the shins, and the sweet one's the only one who can administer it to him in the proper way. Good for her, if she can work up the gumption that she should have had from the get-go.

North was talking earlier, before I laid my head down, about heading for Birmingham but not to his place. He's concerned that the two private dicks might be there and turn me in. He's got good intentions, but like I said, I can't keep holding him back. Something's got to give.

Starting to get dark. I may jump in the tub later this evening,

after we've parked somewhere. Catch you then, honey.

7:11 PM FRI

Well, that was a blast … not! We pulled into town earlier, and North invited me to go with him to a basketball game. He decided to park us with a bunch of other RV's near this arena where his favorite team was playing. I wasn't getting much out of it myself, so I left and went outside for a smoke. Seems you can't smoke indoors some places anymore. Wonder what the world's coming to, Ruby. Not like it used to be, when men were men and women were women and nobody gave nobody any trouble for exercising their rights. So, not wanting to cause any trouble for the kid, I complied and stood outside the arena with one of those full-strength coffin-nails. Gonna go sooner or later, so why not enjoy the ride on the way down—meaning the natural way, you see, not that *other* way.

Wouldn't you know it, while I was standing there puffing away, one of my old trucker buddies comes by in one of those little buses, honking his horn and hollering, "Sweedee Feathers! What's happened, gal? Some trucker drop you off and leave you?"

I hollered back, "Well, if it isn't Howie Johnson. Now you know no trucker worth his salt would ever abandon old Sweedee. Better not, if he knows what's good for him."

"Hop in, gal!" he said. "I'll give you a lift back to his rig, wherever he parked it."

"Thanks. But what happened to yours?"

"Aah! I parked it and decided to retire. My old lady—you remember Maggie—she talked me into it. Have a seat. Where're you parked?"

"It's over there where those other RV's are. I'm traveling with a friend in his. Sort of a vacation, if you would."

"A friend, huh? What about that guy you were shacking up with. What was his name?"

"Hey, I wasn't shacking up. We were good friends, too. But he

decided to kicked the bucket. His kid was headed back here and offered to give me a lift. So, how is old Maggie these days?"

"Sad to say, my Maggie passed away, too. A fella gets lonesome without a good gal around. I've been seeing her sister Maudie. She's a sweet one. In fact, we're planning on tying the knot sometime next month. Say, you need to get you another fella, too. Don't go letting yourself crawl off somewhere alone. We're not made to be that way. I mean, you get to thinking only of yourself, and it starts eating you up something terrible. I know. Get another, and get your mind off your worries. Know what I'm saying?"

"Well," I said, "you always gave me good advice, Howie. I'll take it under consideration."

"Let's see here, Sweedee. Which one is yours? Oh, don't tell me. That one over there with your signature on it. You mean, he let you do that?"

"Have to admit, I took it upon myself. But his family owns a paint shop, so it shouldn't be too hard to get off once I'm done with it."

"Well, you take care now. Good to see you again, Sweedee."

"You, too. And hey, keep it between the lines, you old coot."

"Will do. Look me up when you like. And take my advice to heart, won't you?"

Yeah, good old Howie. All my trucker buddies were special. When it's all said and done, I'll get the kid to drop me off at a truck stop and hitch a ride to wherever suits me. Don't know what I'll do when I get there, but the Big Guy will see to it I'm provided for. As for that Drew fella back there, would've been nice to hook up maybe. I don't know, I …

BAM! BAM! BAM!

What the …? That can't be North banging on the door, unless he got drunk and forgot his key.

"Police department! Open up!"

I'm looking out there and see these two cops alright.

Hold your holsters!

"Ma'am, we're with Birmingham police. We have an arrest warrant for a Miss Susan Feathers."

Warrant? What did she do?

"Are you Miss Feathers?"

Depends.

"We're going to have to ask you to step outside, ma'am."

Sure thing. But no cuffs, alright.

"Sorry, ma'am. We're gonna have to cuff you before taking you in. Would you step outside?"

No cuffs. That's my one condition.

"We're not here to negotiate, ma'am. There's no other option."

Okay. But don't say I didn't warn you.

Sorry, Ruby. Gotta sign off. These guys don't know what they're in for.

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Chris

After a few slaps on the back and some "nice try's", and though the Ingots were ahead by twenty points, I lost all enthusiasm for the rest of the game and decided to head back to the Duck. I was prepared to skip the shuttle service and just walk the length of the lot. I even could've went and found a bar to drown my sorrows in. I mean, I had all night to sleep it off, didn't I? Tomorrow would be another day, another mile or so to travel, after downing a cup of Sweedee's full-strength coffee and whatever was left of the doughnuts. Fuel for the road.

"*One more mile to go, but we don't know where*," I sang to myself, as I crossed the lobby area and headed for the glass doors. But outside, I managed to lift those flash-weary eyes of mine and behold what shouldn't have been standing there but was.

"Hey! Again, I guess."

"Hey!" I replied to her.

"So, did you win?"

"Huh? Oh! You mean …?"

"Well, I saw you on TV, and so I, uh …"

"And so you …?"

With hands on hips, she said, "You don't remember me, do you?"

“Should I?”

“You said I had beautiful lungs. Remember?”

“Why would I say that?”

“Hmph! Perhaps because I don’t smoke, unlike your friend. Does that ring a bell in that brain of yours?”

Let me tell you, I could hear bells ringing alright. Loud and clear. And the sight of her was soothing to the eyes, as well. What stood before me was none other than what I just knew had to be the girl of my dreams, the same one I’d met in that store a while back and hadn’t been able to get out of my mind ever since.

Seems I’d been given that third shot after all. Score, Ingots!

SHE SAID her name was Allie and asked if we could go somewhere and talk. I started to suggest we head over to Mott’s, but chances were we’d run into Mosby. And my place was probably still being watched. I figured Sweedee wouldn’t mind the company, so we rode in Allie’s car over to where the Duck was parked.

To be honest, her coming out of nowhere and wanting to see me, well, my ego wasn’t the only thing getting a boost. I mean, I had no idea what her intentions were, and I was trying real hard not to entertain any of my own. Considering all of what had befallen me thus far, with tricksters appearing right and left, I had to get hold of myself and stay real. That in itself simmered things down to where I knew that she knew we were both not going to rush things. Even the bells ringing in my head were crooning, “Slow down there, partner. If she’s the one, you’ve got a whole lifetime to grow into it.”

Before we went in, though, she stopped to inspect Sweedee’s art work on the outside wall.

Allie mumbled, “So that’s what she was talking about. Stickers.”

“If you like it, let her know,” I said. “She’s particularly proud of her work, such as it is.”

When I opened the door—still croaking like a frog in the night air—Allie seemed reluctant to enter at first.

"Believe me," I told her, "She can seem a bit rough, but don't let that fool you."

"I'm okay. You lead the way then."

Inside, I looked around, but no sign of Miss First Class, not even in the sleeping quarters. I knocked on the bathroom door, but nothing. I did pick up here lighter, pack of cigarettes and that little voice recorder of hers from the floor up front. "Strange. She's never without these."

"Your friend?"

"Yeah. She's probably just visiting at one of the other campers. So, what do you …?"

"Oh, you play?!" Allie said, gasping and grabbing hold of my guitar, then settling on the sofa with ol' Judy across her lap.

I plopped down on the other end. "I'm more of a writer than a player, actually."

"Really." She then strummed a few chords—I mean, strumming quite nicely, too. Picked a few notes, as well. She was obviously far ahead of me skill-wise, which enhanced the attraction I was feeling.

"Wow!" I said. "You're pretty amazing with that thing."

Allie chuckled. "That's what my ex-husband used to say, that I should do something with my talent. My dad was the one who turned me onto it. That was one of the few things we enjoyed doing together—that is, before he passed away."

"Sorry. I lost mine just recently. We never really saw eye to eye on anything, least of all music. Your ex-husband, he's …?"

"Jack? Well, we didn't see eye to eye either. He was so wrapped up in his work, our marriage became such a secondary thing to him. A shame. Wasn't like that in the beginning."

Allie strummed some more. I sat back and took it in—along with her looks, of course. Her hair was short and blonde, no fancy do. She was dressed like a business woman, in that dark pants suit of hers, something which seemed to be hinting, "keep your distance."

But then, she slipped off the jacket to get a better handle on the instrument, and things seemed to loosen up a bit. Those lips of hers were captivating me, slightly pouted as she sang the tune of a melody. Her fingering of the fret-board was dazzling. Those shapely legs crossed like they were didn't look half bad, either.

"Hope you don't mind," I said, "but I'm still wondering why you came to see me."

Allie strummed one last chord and laid the guitar aside. "To be honest, I don't know why I'm here. You must think that weird or something."

"No, not really. Actually, I sometimes ask myself that question. Like, Chris, when are you ever going to settle down? I'm still that kid who wants to sink the winning shot and travel the open road like a globetrotter. But then, as soon as I got my wish, before that large crowd back there, I had to go and fumble. Makes me wonder if I'm cut out for anything but being a roadie and a songwriting hack."

"But for anyone following their dream," she said, "it has to be worth it. I've always wanted to be a detective, you see, but even after a few years on the police force I never could grasp the basics. Only with doing work as an investigator for an insurance company was I able to find my groove. I mean, I'm still learning, but every step is one step toward that dream of where I really want to be."

"You're an investigator?" I sat up and almost scooted away. "Like, private investigator? You're not by chance one of those …"

"Oops! Sorry. Guess I gave myself away. You probably figured out by now why I'm here, didn't you? I met your friend, Mosby. She told us how to find you. We've been following you ever since you left Baton Rouge, actually. It's not because of you, I mean. It's the woman you're with—your friend, Miss Feathers. Believe me, if I'd known it was you back at that store, I wouldn't have said anything."

"Mosby, huh?" I said, chuckling a bit. "Now I know why she was so anxious to catch up with me. She thought you and I were …

whatever."

"You also need to know," she continued, "we did go to your place. Hope you don't mind, but I snooped around a bit. I had no idea you knew Sonny Talcum. I just love his music."

I had to laugh at that one. "Sorry, I hardly know the dude. He's a real a-hole, actually. If you saw that picture of us together, believe me, he would've taken a picture with the devil himself, if it could keep his name in the spotlight. But it's funny how we seem to click on music somehow. You know, traveling on the road has a music of its own."

"Really? I've never heard of that."

"Sure. There's the harmony of following the flow of traffic, then the melody when you're just cruising. Then comes the change of key, whenever you decide to take a different route somewhere. Yeah, driving the open road has a lot in common with making music."

Allie laughed and shook her head. "Sorry, but you're way more sincere than I am. I mean, I like playing guitar, but it's more like something to relax by than anything. But, hey, if you're really into it that much, don't let me burst your bubble, know what I mean?" She then tapped my knee, kind of in the way Lynn had, in that same playful manner. But whether it was playfulness or perhaps a way of signaling a desire to get more intimate, my ego had already felt the puncture of that last remark. I mean, even with Allie leaning in like she did and sporting the cutest of grins—which in itself might've gotten any smitten dude worked up—still, this uneasy vibe kept taunting me, saying, *Mighty Chris, you've struck out again, man!*

I said, "It's … just a little theory of mine, that's all."

"Oh, but it sounds very … you know, inspiring. Maybe … philosophical, even? Just not my cup of tea though. I'm more the hands-on type. You know, just a down-to-earth realist. In fact, the only two things that have ever made me feel out of touch are my being adopted and not knowing when my birthday is, which kind of sucks whenever others start talking about their family ties and all.

You know?"

"Wait! You don't know when you were born?"

"Never bothered to find out, either."

"Well, then. How about today? It's as good as any. Maybe I could even …" I started looking around the place, with this idea of making some sort of cake for her. In the fridge, I found one doughnut overlooked by the thugs, or even Sweedee herself. It also happened that Sweedee had picked up some birthday candles—for what reason, I didn't have a clue—and I stuck one into the doughnut. Lighting it with her lighter, I presented it to Allie. "Not much, I know. But perhaps, like my music of the road idea, it'll inspire you to think better of yourself. So, there. Happy birthday, Allie!"

Her jaw dropped and face lit up, eyes sparkling, too, which kind of tickled me in a way I could hardly stand.

"I don't know what to say," she said anyway. "I … it's just so … the most … anyone's ever done for me. At least, not since … Oh, forget I said anything. You're one of a kind, you know that, Chris? I'm … honored." After she blew out the candle, it looked like she was about to cry. Instead, what started as a quick smack on the cheek soon turned into a passionate one-on-one. All I can say is, Woe baby, baby!

So, there we were, wrapped in each others arms on the sofa—just like any dude in my shoes could've only dreamed about—when there went someone knocking at the door. My first thought was Sweedee, but she would've just barged right on in. Mosby? She wouldn't have bothered knocking, just hollered, *North! You in there?* Instead, I heard …

"Hallo in there!"

We looked at each other.

Allie then pulled away and started checking her outfit and hair.

I jumped up—more like nearly stumbled, a bit overcome by the succulent moment just had—and opened the door to find Mister Drew standing in the light streaming from the inside.

“Hey there, young fella,” he said. “Was hoping I hadn’t picked the wrong place. Is, uh, Miss Sweedee decent, by chance?”

•

I EXCUSED myself and stepped out, closing the door behind me. Drew explained how he’d pulled out right after we’d left his place, stopped at Mott’s first to look for either us or Mosby, then saw me on TV and headed straight to the arena.

“You must be thinking me wacko for going after Miss Sweedee,” he began. “I can’t believe it myself. Never done anything like it, not even with my Georgie, bless her. Actually, that one came for me, which was so unlike her that I wondered what had come over her. Now, I know. It’s that something inside ya that drives you to do almost anything, no matter how outrageous, you know? I saw it in my Sherry’s eyes that day she came by and said she was going after you. But fate had a way of it, putting her chopper in the shop to slow her down enough to set her head straight. Now, she’s a bit brokenhearted, the gal is, and feeling all the more a fool. But I see you have another, just as she’d figured, and couldn’t supply what she was after. Dear gal!”

“Seems it’s been a wild night for everybody,” I said. “But as for Mosby, I really thought she was through with me. I never realized … that is, I never meant to hurt her. I just didn’t know how to …”

Right then, the door popped open. Allie stuck her head out, holding onto both the door and her phone. “Chris, she’s been arrested! Your friend’s in jail.”

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Hanna

Babe, I'm worried about Mister Jordan now. He's been walking back and forth so much, shaking the trailer so, I'm afraid it might fall apart. And that guy Chris won't be happy about that, that's for sure. I guess that was him playing basketball on TV, wasn't it? 'Cause Mama seemed real worried she'd miss seeing him play and took off real quick. Of course, not before Miss Mosby showed up and made Mama think she was doing something stupid. I guess Mama's still mad at Miss Mosby for some reason. I think Miss Mosby's kind of cool and still cares a lot about us, 'specially Mama, seeing as she didn't want Mama getting hurt over that guy Chris. Babe, I tell you. If grown-up problems are that weird, I wouldn't want to get grown-up ever. Would you?

Looks like Mama's back. And she brought two guys with her.

Mister Jordan's so worried, he's gone out to see who they are. "Allie, this is no time to …"

"G'day to ya, sir," one of the guys is saying, tall and with a beard and wanting so much to shake Mister Jordan's hand. "Name's Drew, and this here is Chris. Pardon, but don't think the young lady meant no harm in what she did."

"So, you're Chris North," Mister Jordan's saying to the other guy who also has a beard but is younger, reaching to shake his hand.

“Yes, sir,” he’s saying, “I see you found my place. Hope you’ll understand if we weren’t here to greet you. I was worried you’d turn in Sweedee before she’s had a chance to clear herself.”

“Well, just so you know,” Mister Jordan’s saying, “I’ve been in touch with your brother’s wife. It was her idea to help us keep up with you on the road. As for Miss Feathers, if she’s been picked up, that might’ve been my doing. I contacted an old colleague with Birmingham PD to keep a look-out. Let me go talk with him and see if something can be worked out.”

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It’s so dark out now, I wonder how the police were able to find Sweedee. This must be the police house. It’s a lot brighter than out there, letting us see things better.

Mister Jordan’s talking to a man who’s about the same size as him. They greeted each other like they were friends, so he must be taking good care of Sweedee. Hope so. This place is so quiet and boring. Even after dark, the police are still working? They must work all the time. Wonder when they get any sleep.

“Clese, I understand your concerns,” the man is saying, “but we’ve got to hold her till the judge can arraign her on Monday. So, no can do on bail for now.”

“Sam, I’d just like a chance to talk with her. Just give me a few minutes.”

“Well, she’s refusing to see counsel for some reason. I can’t have one of my men go in there without an attorney present. If you’re saying you’re just checking on her welfare, there shouldn’t be any problem with that. Though I should warn you, she’s a pretty feisty gal. She managed to beat up two of my officers.”

“Beat them up?”

“They said that when they went to cuff her, she fought like hell. Never seen anything like it. One got a black eye, and the other’s leg was badly bruised. Sad to say, I’ll have to add assault to the

resisting arrest charge."

"They did get her cuffed, right?" Mister Jordan's asking.

"Barely. Got her in the back seat and were ready to bring her in, when she'd somehow gotten out of the cuffs and went to dangling them against the cage, saying, 'mind if I keep these?' Beats the dickens out of me how she did it. Well, they proceeded to try cuffing her again. But let me tell you. I had to send one of them to the emergency room."

"I guess, as long as I'm not trying to cuff her," Mister Jordan's saying, "there should be nothing to worry about. My understanding is that she's a pretty strong willed lady." He's looking over at Chris now and smiling.

Wow, Babe! Sweedee's a lot stronger than I figured, if she could beat up two grown cops.

Mister Jordan's now speaking to Mama. "Y'all just wait in the lobby. I'll go in and talk with her. Won't be but a few minutes."

"You sure, Clese," Mama's saying. "I'd want some back-up, in case she gets out of control."

"For some reason, I don't think it'll come to that."

Well, there goes Mister Jordan to see Sweedee. And there goes everyone else back up front. They're not watching us now, Babe. Let's catch up with Mister Jordan. I think that, if Sweedee sees you and me, she'll be nicer with Mister Jordan.

Mister Jordan, let me come with you. Sweedee knows me and will be nice.

"Hanna, an interrogation room is no place for a …"

Please! She just needs to see that nobody wants to cuff her anymore.

"Sweetheart, I … well, with what I have to tell her, seeing you should make her think twice about it."

Okay, Babe. We've got to stay behind Mister Jordan and not say anything, while he talks to Sweedee. He says that'll be safer.

Boy, this is the most boring room I've ever been in. There's nothing in it but a table and two chairs. Doesn't Sweedee have some place for using the bathroom? And looks like they took her jammies

away and gave her these other awful looking jammies. They're all orange and really dull looking. Sweedee usually likes blue a lot, so this must be making her feel real sad right now.

"Hm. Well, hello again." She's talking to us, Babe.

Hello.

"What?" she's saying to Mister Jordan. "You guys are going to torture me with cuteness now? Guess all that muscle didn't work for you, did it?"

"Just so you know," Mister Jordan's saying, "you put one of them in the emergency room."

"Sorry to hear it. But I did specifically warn those two bozos not to cuff me. I've never been cuffed, and I'm never gonna be cuffed, end of story. I love my freedom too much, you see."

"Well, it didn't help your case, that's for sure. Oh, and don't worry. I'm not a lawyer. I work for an insurer of the museum you used to work at."

"Really. You know where I used to work, huh? Have we … met before?"

"As a matter of fact, we have."

"I saw you in that store a while back. Figured you for a cop."

"Use to be, and that's where I know you from."

"Hm. Say, uh, I could sure use a smoke right now. Think you could help me out?"

Mister Jordan turned to look at the door for a second. I'm looking but don't see anybody either. Wait a minute, Babe. He has a packet of ciguhrits, and is giving one to Sweedee. And using a lighter, too? Guess he didn't want anyone seeing him help her, since Sweedee can't go to the store for herself anymore. I wouldn't, not in that orange suit.

"I've been trying to quit myself," he says.

"Well, I haven't," Sweedee says back. "Never will. I'm not a quitter. Got it!"

"Hey, it's your lungs."

"And proud of them. So, you were saying you know old Sweedee

from some place?"

"I was with Atlanta PD back then. I'm retired now. But I am very familiar with your case. In fact, it was a friend of yours who got me involved. J Ventress North."

"You knew Vent?"

"Not personally. He sent me some info on your case once, including an affidavit he drew up attesting to your innocence. Ever since, I've tried to dig up anything I could to back it up. Unfortunately, the people who set you up have rigged things in their favor. I couldn't make any headway. My boss sent me to recover some stolen art works. I've been tracking you on my own, to see if I could flush out those people who framed you for the art thefts. So far, it seems they're real anxious to get their goods back, on top of using you as their front."

"You seem to know so much about me," she's saying, "but I hardly know anything about you, except you were some sort of cop."

"It was when you were hospitalized at Saint Elizabeth's. It was me and my partner who questioned you about the, uh, incident where you were assaulted. You turned us down, didn't want to talk. Months later, my partner found out you'd had a child, but that was after you'd disappeared. I'm here to let you know. She's alive."

Sweedee's staring real hard at Mister Jordan. She almost looks like she's going to cry.

"Yes, she's alive, Miss Feathers. In fact, she's my partner. And this little lady here …"

Oh no, Babe! She's looking at me now. What for? Is Mister Jordan saying that … that Mama is …?

But now, she's looking away, like she's not feeling good. "Get her out of here!"

Oh, Babe! Sorry for squeezing you so hard, but I can't move.

ARRIVALS

Birmingham

Atlanta + Beyond

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Chris

Back when I was plodding through BR Technical and supposedly learning the finer points of accounting—my old man's suppositions, mind you—I had a bad habit of skipping classes for no other reason than that I hadn't done the homework and didn't want to face a teacher's belittling me in front of the whole class. I say "bad," but were my intentions really that bad? I mean, I used the time to do other things more conducive to my aspirations as a musician. That should've counted as something good, wouldn't you think? Believe me, that outlook was nowhere conducive with how my old man saw things. Rather, his supposed plans for me aimed at severing my whims from those same aspirations and directing my ass toward helping to maintain the family business. I hated that. And that hatred in itself made me want to skip more and more class-time, just as a way of thumbing my nose at everything Daddy thought to be so important, things like practicality, sensibility, accountability. And there's that word "accounting" again. Account for what? The question I often posed to myself back then.

After Allie had dropped us off that night back at the Duck, Drew offered to go pick up something for the two of us to chow down on. While waiting for his return, I sat on the sofa and strummed a little on ol' Judy. Allie had made her style of playing seem so easy and

smooth. Don't get me wrong. I knew my chord fingerings and all, but had never invested that much time toward improving my handling of the instrument or getting any richness of tone like she was capable of producing. It made me wonder how much further along she was than me, and whether I could ever hope to catch up. I mean, kissing and falling into bed together would've been the easy part. Spending time together and learning to accept each other's strengths and weaknesses, that would've required some work. And all those things so important to Daddy—practicality, sensibility, accountability—I'd have to start applying, if I ever wanted to develop any kind of substantial relationship with the woman, no doubt.

Back to the matter of my skipping class in school—something which only came to mind again, while I was strumming and waiting on supper—I have to say that none of that self-acquired off-time had gotten squandered for nothing, with a good bit having been invested into reading. One of the books I picked up back then was Robert Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the greater portion of which, I discovered, was given to traveling the open road, something very much conducive to my youthful thinking at the time. Of course, the book was also packed full of these highbrow philosophical inquiries; but, at that young age, those just flew over my head without ever attempting a landing. On the surface, it seemed more a travelogue of how Persig, his son and a couple of friends set out on a cross-country trek on their motorcycles. Like I said, I really didn't explore much deeper than that, in the same way I would often gloss over a road map, checking out the main routes while ignoring the rural back-roads and off-the-grid outposts which lent their histories and legends as worthier material to write about than such adolescent crap as love and good times.

You might then be wondering what any of this rambling has to do with Sweedee getting arrested and us trying to extract her from that predicament. Well, to put it simply, my skimming over Persig's

philosophy and my initial response to the upcoming situation had something in common: a brain still more given to *skipping* than accounting.

Some people's reality was just different from others.

That first night, all I had to account for was the fact of Sweedee not being on board the Duck any longer, but in jail, no longer my concern at the moment but somebody else's. Rather, others were involved now in her well-being and safekeeping. There seemed a whole weekend ahead of me, without her nagging presence to endure. Come Monday though, she'd be hauled before a judge where Mister Jordan said he would present some evidence which hopefully would convince them to release her. I even gave my number to Allie, to keep informed of how things would roll—that and a hope of showing her how serious I was about getting to know her better. Thus, I would sever their reliance on Lynn for news about either me or Sweedee. Already it seemed my ties with Sweedee herself and her plight were coming undone, leading me to think I'd be back to my old life before long.

My envisioning that good fortune got a boost, when, after chowing down on a couple of pieces of fried chicken, then lending Drew the remote to the TV, I got a call from Lynn with news of certain changes having occurred on the home-front. I went and sat on the bed in back, while she filled me in.

First, she related how she'd confronted Vent Junior with the fact of Darla's having led me into a trap.

"I gave him two options, Chris," she said. "Either she goes, or I do. Well, that seemed to open his eyes for a change. She put up a real fuss with him and tried making him bow again to her whim. But I finally put a stop to that nonsense, let me tell you."

"Good for you, Lynn," I replied. "My brother needed someone to rein him in, and I couldn't think of anyone better for it."

"Oh, Chris!" she said, with that girlish giggle of hers. "It was you who helped me, too. Maybe even Miss Sweedee had a hand in it, giving me the courage to not back down. And that leads me to

another matter I brought up with Vent. You ready? I told him, 'and just one more thing. I want you to open that safe and give Chris his share of your daddy's estate.' Well, he tried to joke some more about it, but he could see I was serious on that one, too. I mean, I really love the man and want him to do right, you know? So, he did. I haven't opened it yet. Do you want me to read it to you?"

"Sure, go ahead. I'm ready."

She said there was nothing in the sealed envelope but a letter from Daddy to me. In between the sobs and whimpering in Lynn's voice, I took in the contents pretty well.

Dear Chris,

First of all, get this straight, son. You will always be my boy. Got it? Good!

Now then, as you read this, I'm assuming you've already met my friend, Sweedee Feathers. I know you want to think of her as that 'floozy.' But she's none of that, you hear? Don't ever underestimate her goodness. I've done enough poor things in my day to wonder how I could've deserved a gal like her to come walking into my life. Don't get me wrong. Your mama is still your mama, though she has her faults. You've got to respect that. It's just that I and her don't see eye to eye anymore. But that's none of your concern. Your concern—and I'm not trying to lay this on you for more than needed—is to look after Sweedee for a while, till she can find someplace to settle. I wish I could've done more for her, but I'm asking you, not forcing you, to be there for me. She believes in someone called the Big Guy. I don't know who that is, but maybe he'll come along and help you with doing the right thing.

I know you said you don't want any of my money, so I'm not giving you any. What I am giving you is the Duck. I put a lot of money into it, to make it to where you can live out your dream as you see fit. You're my son, and I want you to be happy with whatever you decide to do with your life. Consider this for what it's worth, a helping hand. That's all.

You make me proud for standing up for yourself, you hear me? And I love you for it.

"And that's all there is," Lynn concluded. "He loved you, Chris. I always knew he did. And I love you, too, for helping me to find my footing. Well, I've said enough. Vent will be wanting his dinner before long."

"I'll be in touch," I assured her. "Right now, I've got some things to take care of first. But thank you, Lynn."

With that said, I pulled the gold card from my wallet, grabbed that pair of scissors Sweedee had bought for herself, and cut the sucker clean in two. I'd had enough of North Brothers as well as the Syndicate and its wily ways. From then on, and as long as I could keep gas in the tank, I would call the Duck my new home. And with that said, my first act as homeowner was to extend my hospitality to Drew to stay the night so we could both look in on Sweedee in the morning. Obviously, Drew had taken such a liking to her, chasing her down like he did, and I was all for it. He seemed like the type of dude, too, who could balance out her gruff attitude with his old boy cheerfulness.

"Say there, mate," he asked, "what do you reckon she'd be wanting for her brekky in the morrow?"

"Coffee and doughnuts, naturally. If you bring her that, she might actually kiss you, or else be kind enough not to blow smoke in your face."

"Right, then. A cup of joe and a few fresh pastries we'll find her. Lift her spirits."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm beat. Been driving all day."

"Sure thing. Why don't you take the bed back there, while I'll be just fine on this couch here."

We both then settled in for the night.

As I lay on the bare mattress, I was thinking again of Persig's book and its philosophical angle, having read the thing a few weeks

before to kill time in between gigs with the Dillards. This go around, I was able to pick up a little more of what he was saying, and felt like it all came down to this: be honest with yourself. Though I couldn't yet see how to apply that message to my own situation, there was bound to be something in everything that happened the next day which would leave me with no option but to face the facts.

But ahead of that, I had to endure yet again that dream from before. I mean, the one with the little girl who at first looked like Penny's Amy, but now resembled more Allie's Hanna. She was holding a stuffed duck, not the penguin that Hanna owned. And she was dressed again like Sweedee, raspy voice and all. I found myself standing in the middle of a dark highway, trying to remember where I'd parked the Duck.

"Take me home, Chris!" the little girl hollered.

"Sure, honey. Just as soon as I can find the Duck."

"But I've got the duck right here. Take me home, will you?"

"I don't think either of us can even fit on that thing. Besides, it's got no wheels. See?" I guess I was trying to be silly with her.

"You've got the card to make it go."

I figured she meant the gold card and hated to tell her I'd cut it up. "Just give me a minute, and we'll get going. Now, where did I park that thing?"

"She doesn't want you anymore. You have to let her go."

"Who do you mean? Sweedee?"

Just then, I could hear an engine being revved. I thought it might be the Duck's, and that someone had cranked it up. There was also music playing, making me think I'd left the Duck's radio on.

That's when I woke up.

Turned out, it was my cell phone's ringtone I'd been hearing. The sound of the revving engine was coming from outside. I answered the phone while looking out the window. Drew had the hood of his pickup open and was doing some maintenance on the

engine.

The call was from my big brother, of all things.

“Hey buddy,” Vent Junior started. “Thought you’d be up by now. I guess Lynn spoke to you already.”

“Yeah, I learned a few things,” I responded. “Things like how Miss Cutie-pie was screwing us both around, and Daddy giving me the Duck.”

“Well, if you think I owe you some sort of an apology, then, well, … yeah, you’d be right. Sorry, buddy. Just take good care of her. I mean, the Duck. The Feathers woman, that’s your choice, not mine. Anyway, hope you’re not too sore. When you get a chance, stop by and visit, okay? I mean, we’re still family.”

“Just give me some time to straighten things out, and I’ll be by. See you later, cream pie.”

“Cream pie? What the …”

Of course, I had no intention of letting him know about Sweedee’s arrest. All that would’ve led to was a big fat “I told you so”. I wasn’t about to let him hold that one over on me.

While heading up front to see if Drew was ready to go visit Sweedee, another call came through.

“Chris!” a voice was saying through the phone, when I answered.

“What? Who?” I looked and saw the number was Allie’s. “Oh, hey! what’s up?”

“Chris, we just saw it on the news. They were transferring her from the jail this morning and somehow Miss Feathers got loose. She’s escaped!”

Woe Nelly, for sure!

Allie said that she and Mister Clese were on their way to the police station on another matter, but would call me later with further details. And that was it. I slapped myself on the head, partly over this new development but also how I hadn’t even gotten a chance to ask Allie how she was doing.

“So, Sweedee’s on the loose,” I mumbled. “Figures. As for Allie

…”

I should’ve sensed something with that phone call, like the approach of a rain-laden cold front, with that compressed feeling from the cold shoulder that was already coming down on me hard. But I was still reeling from that kiss we’d shared the night before, too mindless to consider that I might’ve been made to look the fool for the hundredth time. Made myself, rather.

It was like, some people’s reality was just so different from others, you know? Mine was about to take a backward turn, what with having now to deal with hunting down Miss First Class and finding out where she wanted to go next. So much for skipping.

37

Hanna

You know, Babe, I asked Mama, and she said it's Saturday. And you know what that means? Saturday morning cartoons! Yay! But there's no channel on this TV with cartoons. Maybe I just watch too much TV, you think, Babe? Maybe I need another hobby, one like Sweedee's. I just have to collect a lot of stickers first. Or maybe I need to take up painting pictures, or something, just to get out of the house.

Mister Jordan's in the bathroom shaving right now, and Mama's over there brushing her hair. They rented this hotel room with two beds which were real nice to sleep on last night. Sure is a lot nicer in here than in Mister Chris' trailer, though not as cozy. Still, a TV with no cartoons is just a TV.

I'm still thinking about Mama. She doesn't know yet about Sweedee and what Mister Jordan told her. I'm not sure how to take it either myself. Is she really …? Well, Mister Jordan told her so, and I don't think he'd lie to her, 'specially with her in jail and looking kind of tired and having to wear those old orange jammies instead of her good ones.

Oh, look Babe! They're showing that place where we went to last night, where they have Sweedee. Looks a lot nicer in the daylight. Aah! Babe, it's a picture of Sweedee! She's on the TV.

Mama, they're showing Sweedee on TV!

"What? Where …? Oh, my gosh! Clese!"

"Yeah, what's up?" Mister Jordan's asking, sticking his head out of the bathroom, with shaving cream on his face.

"Wait a minute," Mama's saying, trying to get the clicker to work. "How do you get the sound up? They're saying she's escaped!"

"What?!" Mister Jordan's coming to see, too. "Wait, what are they saying?"

"Listen."

"… Again, Birmingham police are reporting an inmate having escaped their custody this morning. Susan Feathers was being readied for transfer to Atlanta, when officers say she somehow slipped away unnoticed. A bulletin has been issued for her capture. She's wanted on multiple counts including resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer …"

Mama's getting her phone out. "I've got to call Chris and let him know."

Mister Jordan's phone is ringing, too.

Not a very nice picture of Sweedee, is it, Babe? And she looks real mad for some reason.

Mama's finished with her phone now. "Chris said he and that guy Drew are going to try and find her. Think we should help out?"

Mister Jordan's still on his phone but waving to Mama. "Yes, sir. I understand. We'll see you Monday morning then … That was the Director. He's telling us to head back and let the police handle the matter of Miss Feathers."

"You mean, just like that?" Mama's saying. "We're off the case?"

"It's out of our hands, Allie. There's really nothing more for us to do."

"So, that's it. We're just going to pack up and go home and leave the poor woman on the street then."

"It probably won't take them long to find her. Look, I'm just as peeved as you are. I was hoping to share some evidence with the

prosecutor that might've gotten her bail reduced. But now … Sorry, Allie. We might as well pack up and head back to Atlanta."

Mister Jordan's gone to clean his face. Guess we have to go, too, Babe. Wonder what Mister Jordan wanted to give the possy-cuter to help Sweedee out.

Mama's going over and standing in the bathroom door. "Clese, I still feel like you're not telling me everything. Come on! Just let me …"

There's someone knocking at the other door now. It can't be Sweedee, can it? Mama's going to check.

"Morning, ma'am." It's a policeman. Wonder if he's looking for Sweedee. "Is Mister Clese Jordan available?"

"I'm Clese Jordan. What can I do for you, officer?"

"We have a report of a stolen vehicle. It's from a rental company in Baton Rouge. We found the vehicle parked downstairs. The record shows it as rented in your name, sir. I'll need you to follow me to West Precinct for questioning."

"I understand. We'll be down shortly. Could you give us a few minutes?"

No, Babe, it doesn't look like he was looking for Sweedee. Just something about Mister Jordan's car being stolen. Wow, Babe! Lots of things happening, and it's only Saturday morning.

°

HERE WE ARE, back at that same police house. You know, it really doesn't look any better in the daytime than it does at night. I can understand why Sweedee didn't want to stay there and tried to be someplace else.

It's a lot busier than it was last night, too. Mister Jordan's talking to a man behind a window. I can't see the man, but Mister Jordan thinks there has been a mistake, that his car is not stolen. I mean, it's right outside. Can't they see it?

"Sir," the man is saying, "all we know is, the rental company

reported the car as stolen. My advice would be to contact them. Until that happens, and they inform us, we'll have to impound the vehicle."

"Look here, Sergeant," Mister Jordan's saying, "here's the paperwork, and here's a copy of the receipt. That should be sufficient, don't you think?"

Here comes that man that Mister Jordan knows from last night.

"Clese, what seems to be the problem?"

"Sam, I've been trying to explain to your man here …"

Babe, remind me to never get a car. I'd rather have a trailer like Sweedee's got. Everything to do with a car can be so messy to figure out, that you're better off walking or riding a bike. I bet Mister Chris and Sweedee don't have this much trouble. They're riding in a trailer that belongs to them. There must be rules only for cars, since you have to borrow those and aren't allowed to live in them, at least not for very long.

"Just sit tight, Clese," Mister Sam is saying. "Let me check this out for you."

"Thanks, Sam, I really appreciate it."

"Oh, by the way," Mister Sam's saying now, "we got a report earlier that someone saw our fugitive getting into a truck driven by a man with a beard. That's about all there is so far. Our guys are out scouring the streets at the moment."

"Well, I trust they'll find her soon enough … hopefully without incident."

"We plan to be extra careful this go around."

Here comes Mama. "I just spoke to Chris. They found out she was dropped off at a truck park and are going there to look for her. Think we should go and help out?"

"Well, as soon as we get this mess straightened out, we'll head down there, but only to make sure they're not trying to harbor her. If she's okay and willing to turn herself back in, we'll leave it at that and head back to Atlanta."

"You spent a good bit of time with her last night. You didn't say

anything to her that might've provoked her to take off, did you?"

"Allie, I've interviewed lots of suspects in my time with the force. You can never tell when one's ready to bolt. They usually already have a plan to do so as soon as you have them in custody."

"Uh-huh. And is that how Feathers was when you and Daddy went to question her in that hospital back then?"

"What?"

"You *know* what, Clese. I did a little more digging like you suggested and found a report where she was admitted to Saint Elizabeth's after she was … well, I won't mention it in front of Hanna. But you certainly know what I'm referring to, don't you?"

Mister Jordan's making that funny breathing noise again, Babe. He usually does it when Mama brings up something he doesn't want to talk about, but then talks about it anyway.

"Allie, I don't … let's step out in the hallway for a bit."

Uh-oh, Babe. I think I might need to go potty soon. But let's listen and see what Mister Jordan's trying not to say.

Mama's got her arms crossed now. "OK, Clese. What's the deal? What's really going on?"

"When I spoke with Miss Feathers last night, I told her some things she needed to hear. Now, I'm telling you. Yes, it's true. She was admitted to that hospital back then, and some guy came in and … well, when we tried asking her about it, she just clammed up. It wasn't too long afterwards, she disappeared for a while. Several months later she showed back up, very much pregnant. The child was born with severe heart trouble. They had it on life-support for several days. Again, Feathers disappeared. They speculated that she must've thought it wouldn't survive. But it did. It was your dad Milt who was the most affected by what happened. He took pity on the child and wanted to help."

Babe, I'm really starting to feel it coming. But I've got to hold on.

Mister Jordan's gone silent and keeps looking at Mama.

There's even a police woman over there who seems to be

worried about her, too. She looks kind of old to be policing, don't you think?

Mama's shaking her head. "You're not making any sense. What's this got to do with Daddy? And why are you telling me this?"

"What I told Miss Feathers last night needed to be said. The woman's spent years on the street, not knowing the truth."

"And what is the truth? What's this really about, Clese?"

"Allie … it's about you."

Mama's shaking her head some more, with her mouth open, too. She doesn't look so well, either. And I don't feel so well myself. I've really got to go, Babe.

"All this time," Mama's saying. "All this time. No one … And the woman could've just …"

Mama! Mama, I've got to go.

"What, honey? Got to go where?"

I really need to …

"*Ma'am?*" That police woman is talking to Mama now. "I think she's saying she needs to go to the restroom. If you don't mind, I can show her where it is and take her there myself."

"Oh, yes, thank you. Hanna, go with this lady then come right back. Clese, I … I don't know what to say. You're telling me …?"

°

SORRY, Babe. I know you wanted to hear more of what Mister Jordan was saying, but I just couldn't hold it any longer. I sure hope Mama's not mad at Mister Jordan for telling her about Sweedee. Maybe she'll understand Sweedee better now. I was having trouble myself, but I'm started to aksept things a bit better. That's why I want to help Sweedee even more. Because she's Mama's …"

"Little girl! Little girl, are you finished yet?"

Yes, ma'am.

"Let's go this way then. Just down this hallway."

I thought it was the other way.

“I have someone I want you to meet. He knows your friend Miss Feathers.”

He does? Does he know where she is? Mama said she might be at a truck place.

“Actually, she was on her way to see you. If you go with me, you’ll get to meet her.”

We’re outside now, Babe. This must be the man the police woman was saying knows Sweedee. She’s whispering something to him.

“Why, hello there young lady,” he’s saying to me now. He’s kind of old but looks real nice in that suit. “I’m Doctor Morton. I take it you wish to see Miss Feathers. Well, I’m an old acquaintance of hers. In fact, she said she so much wants to see you.”

See me?

“Yes indeed. She’s already waiting for us in Atlanta. And I’ve spoken with your mother, and she agreed to let us take you with us. We’ll take my car, right over here.”

Oh, Babe! Sweedee’s really asking for me? Maybe she’s sorry for making us leave last night. And that nice police woman’s coming, too. They must’ve told her to look after Sweedee while she’s out of jail.

Boy, he’s got a big car. Almost like a truck and a car in one.

“By the way,” the lady’s saying, “my name is Miss Kitty. And what is yours, dear?”

Hanna.

“Well, Hanna, I have known Miss Feathers for quite some time now. She used to be in my employment.”

The Doctor fella is asking Miss Kitty, “Are you sure we can use her?”

“From what I learned a little while ago, it does seem we may have just a little something extra with which to persuade Miss Feathers to see things our way.”

“Rather fortuitous, Kitty darling. Wouldn’t you say? We came looking to bag our catch, but instead have found the perfect bait

with which to reel her in ourselves."

"You are so right, my sweet."

Kitty … Seems I've heard that name before. Babe, could she be the one that Sweedee attacked? If so, then they're … Oh, no, Babe! What do we do? We can't let them know that we know.

I know. We'll just play along, till we see Sweedee. I have a feeling they're scared of her and won't try to hurt us while Sweedee's around. Stay with me, Babe. We'll get through this thing yet, and help Mama to see that Sweedee's a good person after all.

She has to. It's her Mama, just like Mister Jordan said.

38

Chris

For all Sweedee's talk of having lived on the streets without food or proper shelter, being kept in a jail cell where they fed you everyday and kept you warm and safe should've seemed like a rescue from that terrible state of homelessness. Wouldn't you think? Why she would go and run from that—unless there was something else worth fleeing. Granted, a jail cell offered nowhere near first-class accommodations. Had she become addicted to the Duck? Daddy had sunk a pretty penny into it, and not so much for my sake as perhaps a thought for her comfort, as well.

Again, what could she have been running from?

To my mind, given what that dude at the police station had said, perhaps their trying to cuff her had amounted to a kind of declaration of war. Sweedee was never one to take kindly to being restrained in any way. She always did her own thing, no questions allowed.

I was reminded then—and this while me and Drew were racking our brains trying to figure out where she might've run off to—of what she had said back when Wayne and crew had us corralled inside the Duck, how she was looking for someone—a "her", as Sweedee put it, whoever "her" was. What would've happened had she found the gal? Would the shock of it have made her run like she

did? Had it?

"You know," I said, "she could've caught a ride with some trucker. She apparently knows quite a few out there."

"Could be," Drew added. "Would be a good'un if we had a CB handy."

I found it odd that I'd never even checked whether the Duck had one. Daddy always had a CB in his pickup. Even Vent Junior had one, if for nothing else than to keep tabs on his old Army buddies. Surely, the Duck should've come fully equipped. And sure enough, behind a panel underneath the central console there hung a brand new Wildcat 4500 on a metal bracket.

"Cool one there, mate!" Drew said. "But it don't mean diddly if we don't know who to raise. Let me try my mate Dicky and see if he can give a shout-out to anyone who might've seen her."

Drew called up his buddy Dicky, who said he'd do a breaker one-niner to every trucker in the vicinity.

I told him, "The only thing I'm worried about is, if she got a ride with someone, how far out are they? And could we catch up before she got dropped off somewhere and disappeared again."

"I guess I don't follow ya there."

"Seems she was homeless on the streets for years, and I'm worried that's the direction she's headed again. Makes me feel like she can't even trust us anymore. I'm sure my daddy would climb out of his grave and kick my butt, if something were to …"

Surprisingly, it turned out that some trucker *had* picked her up, not far from the police station. Bummer for her, though, that the dude was ending his run and couldn't haul Miss Fugitive any further than a truck park south of town. I looked it up on the GPS, and we headed down that way.

The truck park had rigs lined up in droves. Talk about your needle in a haystack! I sidled the Duck near the resident truckers' eatery, while Drew took his pickup and circled the perimeter. There was an alley way between two buildings, and that's where I spotted her, scrunched next to a dumpster in the sunlight, still in her orange

prison garb. Thinking she might run if I hurried toward her, I pocketed my hands and pretended to take a stroll that way.

She lifted her head, spotted me, then bowed it again. “Took you long enough. So, kid, how was the game?”

“Had a ticket that got me into a free-throw contest, but I flubbed it on the second try. I got bored with the game and headed back to the Duck. By the way, your buddy Drew showed up looking for you. Turns out, a few more showed up, as well.”

“Drew did? Hm. Bet some cops, too, looking for old Sweedee?”

“Not all of them. Seems there was also a little girl who was just as worried as the rest.”

I sat down on the ground next to her.

Sweedee leaned her head back against the wall. “Yeah, well, they would come looking for me. One of them had some news to give me. Terrible news. Damn cop! And he had to bring her in with him, too. It was the worse thing, letting her see me that way. He should’ve known better.”

“So, you just … run away, huh?”

“Damn straight! I knew what they were up to, trying to … Well, anyway. Couldn’t get one freaking trucker to haul this old gal anywhere. All of a sudden, the rules changed, and they’re all afraid of getting fined. The whole world has changed, North, and I didn’t even notice it. It’s not like it used to be. People used to help each other, you know? Now it’s …”

I could see where she was coming from. When I was growing up on Whitmore in Baton Rouge, we didn’t have much, but at least the neighborhood was clean and safe. People looked out for each other’s kids, too. When we struck gold and moved over onto Sherwood, among the high society crowd, it was clean and safe, too, but nobody cared for anybody there if they didn’t have money. And I later learned how my old neighborhood had soon deteriorated to the point where even I was afraid to ride my bike over there.

“Well, for your information,” I told her, “I for one don’t see

what's the fuss. I mean, you didn't do anything. What are you running for?"

"You wouldn't understand, North. You haven't been where I've been."

I had to sigh, knowing where that one was headed. "You know, this ground is really chaffing my butt. Wanna go sit in the Duck?"

•

AFTER WE GOT inside the Duck, Sweedee made me stay upfront while she went to the back. Apparently, she'd stocked up on pajamas and blue fuzzy slippers. Changing into a pair of those, then finding a bathrobe left hanging in a closet to wear, she handed me the orange jail scrubs and said to toss them somewhere. When I came back, she was sitting on the sofa, puffing away. I remember leaving her lighter and recorder on the table. She'd gotten the lighter, but the recorder hadn't been touched yet.

"Where to now?" I asked.

She picked up the doughnut with the candle I'd made for Allie and was studying it. "Somebody's birthday?" Next, she proceeded to sniff the air. "So, was she worth it?"

"It wasn't like that," I said. "And how did you figure there was a woman?"

"Trust me, North. Candle in the doughnut is an old trick. If nothing happened, then it's your own fault. Should've bought her chocolates. Then, you might've … you know."

"Nothing happened, I tell you. Because that's when Drew showed up and we got the call that you'd been arrested."

She threw away the candle and bit into the doughnut. "Aah! Stale. Maybe we need to stock up again."

"That's … gonna be a problem. See, I got rid of the gold card. It was stolen money anyway."

"Well, what's to be done now?" Despite the thing's staleness, she kept taking bites from it.

“First of all, you’re a wanted woman. How we’re going to work our way around that, I don’t know. As for money, maybe I can ask Drew.”

“Drew again?”

“Oh, that sounds like him coming back.”

When his head appeared in the doorway, Drew let out a big laugh. “Well, blessed be! Sweedee, you done come back from the dead, I see.”

Now, I’d seen Sweedee smile a few times before, a rare phenomenon indeed, let me tell you. But none had been as genuine as the one now appearing spread across that lined face of hers. Though it made the lines stand out even more, it actually improved her looks considerably—and she was not that bad looking, either. I could only imagine what a beauty she must’ve been in her younger years.

“Aah!” she let out. “You know me. Can’t keep a good woman down.”

“I’d be damned,” replied Drew, “if anything could keep you down. Seeing as you’re out then, why don’t we celebrate. Care for a spot of joe?”

“Well, technically, she’s on the run,” I added, “which makes us accessories.”

That smile left her face pretty quick. “You’re not thinking of turning me in, are you?”

Drew was getting the coffee pot ready. “By the by, what was it they had you in for?”

Sweedee took a big sigh then another puff of her cigarette. Next, she stared at me. “North, come with me. Uh, Drew, we’ll be back shortly. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I’ll have your cup ready and waiting, when you’re done.”

Sweedee led me toward the back, to where the tub sat. Daddy had it installed with wood paneling along the front side. Sweedee tapped each panel in turn, until one rattled. It was the one near the faucet, obviously an access panel for the plumbing. She pried it

loose and reached into the void. Out came that bundle of plastic bubble-wrap containing Luke's Mary.

Setting it on the mattress, Sweedee unwrapped it. And there it lay, the pure image of beauty itself, with those crystal clear sky-blue eyes.

"Remember how I told you," she said, "how out on the streets, there was nothing to do but think? Well, I've been thinking on this one—I mean, what else—and I've come up with this. What are we here for, North? I mean, what are we doing here? It's like when you go to the can and wonder, 'now, what did I come here for?' and it hits you like, 'oh!' and you lift the lid. Most people have just freaking forgot and waste all their time doing somebody else's crap and don't bother going and looking for what really matters, until it's too late—that is, if ever. Not me! Not Sweedee! I want to know, you know? I don't want to wind up peeing on myself at the last minute. Look at her, North!" She was pointing to the picture. "What do you see?"

"A beautiful but sad woman, I guess."

"The most beautiful soul, if there ever was one. But look at it. This is the rarest of the rare works, of course. But it reveals something you'll very rarely find anywhere. It's the face of devotion. Devotion to a cause. I'm talking complete and stalwart devotion. Nothing could shake that, not even seeing her boy hung out to dry, bleeding his heart out. Literally, mind you. That's what it's about. All my life, I've wanted to attain that kind of devotion. Had it, too, till they took it from me. Well, they're not taking this one."

Sweedee re-wrapped the thing—carefully, too, like a Christmas present. She set it by the pillow and walked back forward.

While Sweedee sipped her coffee, staring off into space like we weren't there, Drew sat opposite. He took off his cap, rubbed his hands and rocked a bit, like he was anxious to get something out.

"Listen, luv, I've been thinking," he said—meaning to Sweedee, obviously. He seemed to be having a hard time getting his words

out, pausing at random. “You and me, we’re not getting any younger, you know? And … well, what I’m getting at is … I want you to come live with me.”

Sweedee held the cup still, blinking and staring at Drew.

“What I’m saying is …” he tried again. “I want you to come home with me. And to make sure you don’t wind up out on the streets again, it’s got to be permanent. In other words, … Sweedee, I want you to be my wife.”

Sweedee blinked some more and her head twitched a bit. “You … want to … give me a home?”

“The house is too big for one person anyhow,” Drew continued. “And to be honest, I haven’t got my mind off of you ever since you left. It was like … an angel had landed in my front yard. You may call me crazy, but I felt like my dear Georgie, bless her, had been looking down on me in my lonesome state and gone and asked the Lord to send me someone. You know, the Lord, he don’t make mistakes.”

Sweedee set her cup down and laid her hands in her lap. “Maybe I, uh … shut up, North! Maybe … I’ve been thinking of you, too, you know. Yeah. It’s time this old gal settled down for good. Forget about those bozos who are after me. Go into hiding. Yeah. That’s the thing to …”

Just then, my cell phone’s ringtone went off. I’d left the thing up on the dash. Again, an unfamiliar number, though not Darla’s this time.

“Hello?”

“Yes, you are Christopher North, I presume.”

“Yeah. Who am I speaking with?”

“My name is Doctor Morton. I’m an old acquaintance of you father, J Ventress North. In fact, dear old Ventress owed me quite a sum of money, actually. Now that he’s deceased, that debt has devolved on you.”

“I don’t know anything about any money. You probably need to talk to my brother. He’s …”

“He’s not the one who is in possession of what I’m after. The money’s really not the issue anyway. It’s the debt that you owe me. In other words, it’s what you are in charge of. Rather, what Miss Feathers has taken custody of, I might add. I have in my custody a young girl—you must know whom I am referring to—who must be very near and dear to Miss Feathers’ heart. Bring her and the requested item to Emmanuel Museum of Fine Art in Atlanta, and I’ll release the child. That is all. Goodbye.”

°

I STOOD THERE, thinking about how Daddy had always tried shielding us from all the crap he was involved with, then wondering what he would’ve done in this situation. The best option I could come up with was to say nothing to Sweedee, take Luke’s Mary myself and hope that would be enough for those jerks. I would do it for Allie’s sake, not Sweedee’s. At the time, I couldn’t see why they’d said it had to be her. I just needed to do it quickly and get back before Sweedee made a decision about Drew’s offer. Everything would work out for the best, I figured, and I’d get to go back to my life. That was my plan.

But who was I kidding, if no one but myself? I was wading across an unfathomed river, hoping against hope its bottom wouldn’t give way somewhere just in front of my feet. Again, that fear of open drains, and me without a life-preserver.

“Hey, Drew!” I hollered. “Let me help you have a look at that engine of yours. Maybe we can figure out why it’s making that funny noise.”

“Funny noise, you say?” Drew’s replied, with a funny look on his face. “I don’t reckon I follow you. Engine sounded fine to me earlier.”

“I thought I heard something a little off.” I stood with my back to Sweedee and tried winking to him, hoping he’d get the hint.

He tried winking back, until the expression on his face finally

brightened at the realization. “Oh, uh, maybe you were hearing something I couldn’t. Well, then. Pardon there, Miss Sweedee.”

Sweedee had lit a cigarette, and just twirled it in her usual way.

After I’d gotten Drew outside, I told him, “Listen, something else has just occurred. I don’t know how, but you remember Allie’s little girl from last night, don’t you?”

“Sure. Cutest little thing.”

“Well, I just got a call from one of those jerks who must’ve tipped off the police to arrest Sweedee. You see, she’s got something they want, and it appears they’ll go to no lengths to get it back. Sorry to say this, but it looks like they’ve kidnapped Hanna and are wanting to exchange her for the thing Sweedee’s carrying.”

Drew was rubbing his chin, taking in everything I’d said. He started shaking his head. “In other words, we’re dealing with a bunch of blasted dingos. What’s to be done, you suppose?”

“I plan on taking the thing myself. I just need to borrow you truck.”

“Well, that’s a mighty fine plan, but don’t you think you’re risking them not taking the bait? Look here. I’m thinking I may have for you a better plan. First, we’ll be needing some reinforcements, naturally.”

“Mosby?” I said. “Wouldn’t everybody showing up at once put the girl in more danger?”

“My Sherry knows a thing or two about the ins and outs of hostage negotiating.”

We went back inside to inform Sweedee. Of course, we had to hold her back from running out there and taking Drew’s pickup herself. I mean, considering she’d never driven a car in her life, we doubted she’d make it past the curb without wrecking the thing. After she’d simmered down, I was ready to call Allie. But that soon proved unnecessary.

The door popped open—more like someone was strangling the frog this time—and there stood Allie herself, her face set into a haggard scowl. She scampered up into the Duck, scanned the place

side to side, then gave Sweedee a vicious stare and blurted, “You! What did you do with my daughter?”

39

Hanna

Wow. Babe! This place, it's like a spaceship. It's nothing like all the other buildings in town. They're all big and mean looking and crowded together. This one has big glass windows and walkways and big round walls. Everything goes every which a way. You look at it one way then another, and it doesn't even look like the same thing. I could spend all day in here and never leave. Honest. I wouldn't know how to get out of there. I'd keep walking and climbing and walking and … maybe if I learned to roller skate, it'd be more fun to just zoom around looking at everything they have.

When we got here, that Doctor fella dropped us off and went somewhere else. Miss Kitty led us in and called this man to come and look after us until Sweedee gets here. You know, it seems I know him from somewhere. He's really nice looking and so friendly. Miss Kitty went somewhere, too. So it's just you, me and him.

"I'm Jack, by the way," he's saying. "You're Hanna, right? I once knew a Hanna. You don't think you're related, do you?"

I don't think so. I'm the only Hanna I know.

"Well, Hanna. Why don't we look around? There's lots of great things to see in here."

I wouldn't mind just walking around. This place is so pretty to look

at by itself.

He's taking us around to look at the pictures on the walls. There's other people here, too, all looking at the pictures and statues in the glass boxes. Some of them are really weird to look at, while others are really nice to look at. Some are really huge, while others are small and cute and make more sense.

"Hanna, have you ever visited a museum before?"

A moo-zeem? That's what this place is called?

"Heh-heh! Something like that. I just started working here a few months ago. I'd much rather be here than at my other job. Here, you can keep looking and looking and never get tired. It's like visiting another world."

I think it looks like a spaceship. You think it came from another planet maybe?

"Could be. I just hope it won't have to go back anytime soon. Maybe the people who flew it here will let us keep it awhile."

Jack is so fun to talk with. Don't you think, Babe? Almost like Miss Mosby. And he's real smart, too. He can name all the pictures we see and say who made them. Some he can even tell you the story of. This is a whole lot more fun than watching stupid cartoons. I hope when Sweedee gets here, we'll all be able to look around together. She looked real sad last night in that police house. Maybe that's why she ran away. I can't see her running away from this place. Maybe they'll let her stay and not have to go back there. I'd really like to see her smile again, like that day she showed us her stickers on the trailer. She seemed real proud of that.

Ooh! Mister Jack, what is this one?

"That one is *Breakfast for Three* by Charles Courtney Curran."

It's so cute! The little girl is feeding her doll, just like Babe—though Babe doesn't eat much. And the woman … her mama?

"Could be," Mister Jack is saying, breathing like Mama does. "Could be."

He seems lost in thought, like Mama was back aways, and staring at that woman in the picture. Must be a grown-up thing,

getting all thoughty and such.

Oh, and what is this one?

"*Seascape - Isle of Shoals* by Childe Hassam."

Child? You mean a little boy made this?

"No, he was a man when he painted it. According to the dates, he was in his forty's at the time."

Looks scary.

"It's the sea waves crashing against those rocks. You'd have to be careful if you were in a boat out there."

I'll have to tell Mister Jordan. He has a boat, and I wouldn't want him to get hurt, neither. You know, looking close at it, it's hard to tell the water from the rocks.

"Well, it's what's called Impressionism. It's about light and color more than detail. More about how the artist feels than what the object itself is."

In-press-shun … I don't think I can say that one. I'll just say it's pretty, but still a bit scary. Makes me feel glad that Mister Child didn't get hurt, either.

Oh, there's one over there. It's got lots of colors like blue, green, yella and red.

"That one is by Georgia O'Keeffe, called *Red Canna*."

You mean, a woman made that? She must like flowers. And it's so red, almost like a tomatah.

"You like tomatoes, Hanna?"

Yeah, 'specially in salads and on hamburgers. What kind of food do you like?

"I like hamburgers. My favorite is a big ol' cheeseburger with all the works."

I wish I could have one, too. But Mama says it'll attack my heart if I eat it. Speaking of which, do you know Sweedee? My Mama said she once tried to attack Miss Kitty's heart.

"I don't know about that one. When did that happen?"

I don't know. Must've been a long time ago. I didn't want to say anything to Miss Kitty, 'cause she might not let Sweedee visit. Say,

Mister Jack, do you think I could have a cheeseburger later? I mean, while Mama's not around.

"I'll see what I can arrange."

His phone's ringing. Pretty music. He must be talking with Miss Kitty.

"Yes, ma'am. We'll be up shortly … Well, Hanna. Seems it's time for me to take you back to see Miss Kitty. Miss Sweedee should be showing up any minute."

Okay. But, will you be there, too, Mister Jack? To be honest, I'm still worried about Sweedee.

"You have my word. I'll be just around the corner, if you ever need me. I won't let you down, Hanna … not this time."

Hear that, Babe? Jack will be there, so no worries. And after that, we'll get a big ol' cheeseburger, and maybe a chock-lit shake. Don't worry, I'll share some with you. Maybe Sweedee would like one, too, 'specially after eating that old jail food.

Wonder what Miss Kitty wants to see her about anyway. Hope she's not still mad for Sweedee attacking her heart. Maybe that's why Sweedee wanted us to be there, in case Miss Kitty tries to attack Sweedee. And Jack'll be there, too, so everything should be ooo-kay!

I like Jack. Don't you, Babe? Maybe Mama will, too.

40

Chris

If someone had asked me, "Who is Alyssa Babbitt?" I would have shrugged and said, "Never met the woman." Now, as for the woman I had met, the one named Allie and with a little girl named Hanna, whether her first name happened to be short for Alyssa or that mother and daughter shared the same last name of Babbitt, such would have offered no help with my understanding of that blue-robed one sitting there on the sofa now, confronted as she was by this strange huffing dark-suited chick with reddened cheeks who'd just stomped in.

That oddly tongue-tied face of Sweedee's, jaw dropped and brow furrowed, was so busy pivoting back and forth between the glaring woman and me, that the exercising of her neck muscles seemed on a hopeless quest to extract some sort of insight from this dude of all people. About all I could manage for her sake was to step between the two women and give my best shot at settling Allie down by saying, "Look, it wasn't her. I can explain."

With a hardened look on her face, Allie said to me, "What do *you* know?"

Mister Jordan was standing behind her, outside. "Allie! Sweetheart! You've got to keep you head now, hon."

Allie seemed to simmer down at that, but those eyes of hers …

The night before, I'd thought those the softest, sweetest eyes. But now, reflected in them, I saw myself become a stranger.

Allie turned away and stepped outside.

I followed, of course, leaving a hapless Drew behind to keep Sweedee occupied, while I went to try and set things straight.

Even before letting that creaking door shut, I could hear the question of the day being growled from within, "Who the heaven's antithesis was that?"

°

STRANGE ENOUGH, once outside, Allie acted the least interested in anything I had to say, crossing her arms and turning her back while I made my case with Mister Jordan.

First, I asked him, "Whatever gave y'all the idea that Sweedee would take Hanna?"

He looked over at Allie and sighed. "All we knew was that someone had reported Miss Feathers, after she'd escaped custody, hopping into a truck driven by a man. Then later, an officer told us he saw Hanna getting into an SUV with a man and woman. For whatever reason, the two incidents got connected and the wrong conclusions made. If you know something that we don't …"

"It's one of those Syndicate dudes," I said, "a Doctor Morton, that took Hanna. He wants Sweedee to bring something they want. He knew my daddy and knew I was traveling with her. It's really her and what she's toting that they're after."

"It was that police woman, too," Allie said, turning back. "Had to be. She was working with someone the whole time. How could I have let her …"

"Police woman?" I asked.

"Whoever she was," Mister Jordan replied, "it's obvious she was with the same bunch, masquerading as someone from Atlanta PD, claiming to be there to transport Miss Feathers. She must've overheard us talking, put things together and decided to abscond

with Hanna to use her instead."

"But why Hanna?" Allie pleaded. "What would've made them think she had anything to do with … any of this?"

Mister Jordan looked down and shook his head. "It's partly my fault in a way."

"Clese? What … what are you saying?"

"Like I told you, I gave Miss Feathers the whole story, with Hanna standing right there. Then, I told you. All they had to do was see some sort of connection and seize the opportunity … by taking the one person she'd surrender herself for."

Allie turned away, grunted and said, "Who does she think she is?"

"For the moment," I told them, "knowing everything, I'm sure Sweedee's thinking of going through with it, no matter what the cost to herself."

"No!" Allie shot back. "I don't want her involved. In fact, I'm going to go talk to her myself." She started heading for the Duck.

"Allie!" Mister Jordan hollered after her. "Who are you working for? Yourself?"

Allie slowed to a stop then stepped back, staring at the Duck. "Who am *I*? And who is *she*, thinking she can … save somebody? It's my child!" With arms crossed, Allie walked over to their car and stood there, head down.

"Listen," I said, "let me try talking to her. Though I have to tell you, once she sets her mind to do something, it's like trying to argue with a freight train."

"Strong willed, huh?" Mister Jordan said.

Allie turned toward us and said, "Yeah, well, if she's so strong willed, why does she keep running away?" With a sigh, she added, "I mean, why did she run … just when I needed her the most?" Allie stood there, staring off into space, sort of in the way Lynn had.

Who was Alyssa Babbitt? In due time, I would come to realize that this dude at least was never meant to know. From where I stood in the middle of that truck park, trying for a three-pointer

shot to take me into overtime had to be the stupidest move ever attempted.

"I appreciate your effort, son," Mister Jordan told me, "but I'm afraid it's time to turn the matter over to the authorities. I'd advise you to dissuade Miss Feathers as best you can, for safety's sake."

To add to the antics, Allie had never once thought to involve me in the matter, leaving those absurd heroics of mine left dangling in the wind. Her indifference to my attempts to help out had become so obvious—which was understandable, of course. Her child's life was in danger. Still, what might've been a chance to get my heart in tune with hers ended with me playing a solo gig in the dark.

•

WHEN I STEPPED up into the Duck—I really needed to do something about that stupid noisy door—Sweedee was still on the sofa, feet up and arms around her knees, head bowed, just as I'd found her next to that dumpster. She looked up at me then around me at the door, like someone might've been coming in from behind.

"You alright there?" I asked her.

"Huh?" she muttered. "Yeah. I'm … sit down over there, North. I've got something to lay on you."

She was nodding toward the booth.

Drew got up and said, "I best be going for those reinforcements now. Be seeing you two in a bit."

Shaking his hand, I said, "Yeah, thanks, man."

"And you!" he said, pointing at Sweedee. "Stay strong, luv." He was grinning, too.

Sweedee gave him one of those rare smiles again and a nod.

After Drew was out the door, I took a seat in the booth, still facing Sweedee and expecting something else forthcoming.

Sweedee just hopped up and said, "Yeah, but first, sit tight while I use the toilet, just to be safe about it."

I waited, elbows propped on the table, staring out the window,

thinking about Allie and Hanna, wondering what more I could've said or done to make a difference.

Sweedee appeared again, moving kind of fast, but then slowed down and just sauntered over to the coffee pot on the counter. She poured two cups and set one in front of me.

"Huh!" I grunted. "That's a first. You, serving me coffee?"

"Well, don't get used to it. Besides, this is Drew's special brew. Not too bad, if you ask me. Try it."

Seating herself on the other side, she lit a cigarette and stared out the window, blowing one puff of smoke after another.

I sniffed the cup. But since my nose didn't curl up, I hazarded a sip. She was right, for a change. Of course, it could've used some sweetener for my part. There were packs of artificial sweetener scattered on the table top, meaning Sweedee had already dug out all the real sugar packs. I ripped open and dumped one of these, figuring it was better than none.

Sweedee turned from the window, took a sip from her cup, and laid the cigarette in a jar lid used as as ash tray.

Here it comes, I thought.

"First of all, kid, a little advertisement for the young and horny. You're really treading on rice paper trying to see two women at one time. I mean, make up your mind."

"What makes you think I'm seeing anyone, much less two?"

"Well, the place where you screwed up was not using enough air freshener before I came back. I could smell her, remember? Then, when that other one came busting in here and ranting, I put two and two together and saw you doing a juggling act without a net. I mean, come on! That tough gal wasn't enough for you? She seemed plenty stuck on you back at Drew's place."

"Well, FYI, Mosby's already got plenty of dudes who'd be dying to get into her … well, you know what I mean. I'm just a play-thing to her. She'll get over it."

"So, you invite this other over and try your best to get into hers, is that it? Not on my watch. Think! Where is she now? Crying over

her kid being taken. You're the last thing on her mind. Anyhoo, that's not what I wanted to tell you about. Meaning, it's more to the point of things. Meaning, things have changed, and I can't hold back any longer. So, here it goes."

Letting her get me riled up, I needed a good gulp of Drew's brew to settle myself down while waiting for the Sweedee sermon to kick into gear. I mean, we needed to get going to save Allie's little girl, didn't we? But Sweedee seemed to think she had to lay something on me, as she'd said. I waited some more, while Sister Preacher-girl took another puff and laid aside the cigarette again.

"You see, kid," she started, "I once had a kid. But they said she wouldn't make it. So, I left her. Yeah, stone me now! I left my kid lying there and dying. It's been kicking my insides ever since. When you see me using that little squawk box I keep in my pocket, it's my way of making up for it. Don't ask me how, but it helps. Now, I'm confused. I don't know what to make of this other one showing up. And that little girl of hers? You were saying how some of those thugs have her now and they're wanting ol' Sweedee to bring them Luke's Mary to make the trade-off."

"You're going to go through with it, right?" I said. "I mean, you're sure you …"

"What? You take me for some cold-hearted broad who's got nothing to do but sit around and smoke and drink coffee and eat doughnuts? Think! I was the one who found your dad lying there. I'm the one who always has to take out the trash. I'm the one always who has to … Aah!"

Sweedee went silent, started to take another puff, but instead downed some more coffee then rubbed her face.

"You know I don't think that at all," I replied to her rant. "You're one of a kind, Sweedee Feathers. And Daddy, he … he knew that, too, in his own way."

"Let me tell you something about your dad, since we're talking about 'one of a kind'. Well, not just about your dad. Do you know why an artist uses a pallet to mix his paint? You see, all the

primaries were already taken by the Big Guy long ago, so an artist has to look for his own colors. It's like slipping into a bus station during a rain storm. You go in and find all the seats taken. So then, you have to go sit on the floor in a corner by the pay phones or the restrooms. And yeah, it's dark and the floor's cold and hard and filthy, but you make it your own spot and let nobody else touch it or take it from you, you see? In the same way, an artist has to mix his own and make them his and nobody else's. That's all I've done for years, make my own place where no one can come and tell me, 'Move it, gal!' Like I've told you before, there are a lot of stupid people in this world, and even stupider to go trying to move ol' Sweedee out of her corner."

In the midst of the picture she'd been trying to paint, an image showed through of how Sweedee had planted herself in that chair back in Vent Junior's office. To go with it, another image had this same dude settling himself into that empty tub back at Twin Cedars.

"You're talking about contentment," I said. "Some place you can call your own, that nobody can scoot you from."

"Contentment?" she replied with brow furrowed. "Where'd you get … that … one? Hm. Yeah, not a bad idea. Good catch, North! Never thought of it that way. Sweedee's corner. Being content and all that. Aah! But enough about me.

"Where'd it go then? Oh, yeah. Now, here's this cop coming and telling me some gal he knows is my kid. Huh! And her coming and screaming and hollering at her old mom because of *her* kid. Can you beat that? Makes me want to go and … hug her. But won't. For all I know, she's a snake like old Smiley was, talking sweet talk and trying to wheedle her way into my heart."

After taking a good gulp of Drew's brew, I said, "Well, if she's for real, don't think I have any plans on being you son-in-law. She's already over me, that's for sure. I was an idiot for even thinking …"

"Think nothing of it, North," Sweedee replied. "I have my reasons for not taking her at face value."

"But, they're your family. Wouldn't you want to …"

“I don’t have any family. Besides, I’m not doing this for them. I’m doing it for Ruby, and for Vent. Devotion to a cause, remember? Now, enough squawking.”

“Well, I didn’t really mean to go off like I did earlier. I just really thought that … never mind.”

“Don’t ever regret your mistakes, North. They’re the things that you’re meant to learn from. Now, take that crazy interstate and get us there, pronto. I’ve got to save her.”

“Are you sure … I mean, the interstate?”

“Have I ever not been?”

“Well, there was that one time …”

“Shut up, North! Now, drive!”

°

I SLIPPED into the driver’s seat, pulled up the GPS and punched in the museum’s name. It showed a pretty long haul just to get from Birmingham to the outskirts of Atlanta. To make that last stretch a little smoother, I figured I’d first go inside the trucker’s eatery and use what little cash I still had to supply Sweedee with some sort of pastries for her breakfast.

Miss First Class then retreated to the back for most of the trip, not making a sound.

Leaving behind Birmingham, the Duck passed through a long stretch of forested hills and occasional suburbs. There was the wide Coosa River to cross, and some mountain peaks to view on the north side. A good bit of “up one hill then down the other”, before we reached the Chattahoochee River. Several miles later, we were approaching Atlanta. At the interchange from I-20 to I-85 North, the downtown’s skyline came into view.

Sweedee came forward and took the passenger seat as usual, with that bundle snug in her lap now. Not one cigarette, not one cup of coffee, not even a scrap of a doughnut appeared in her hand. Her eyes were kept glued on the upcoming cityscape. Once we’d

exited to street-level, she then fixed them on the sidewalks full of people coming and going.

I saw a few homeless sorts here and there, as well, as we approached the heart of downtown. I tried to imagine how it had been for her, living, no, barely *surviving* like that, day to day for years. But there was no way I could've seen myself in that same position, left sitting there on the concrete while the rest of the world went on its merry way—though it did bring to mind an image of myself sitting in that empty tub back at Twin Cedars. I'd eventually get out of the tub though and go back to my nice comfy life, while those people there had nowhere else to go to get away from the madness of it all. I say, "madness," since it never registered with me how someone could lose it all and still keep a sane and hopeful outlook.

The cell phone's ringtone was sounding. Morton again.

"Mister North, I take it you are on your way by now."

"We just got into downtown," I told the not-so-good doctor. "Just a few more blocks."

"Good, good. Once you've reached Emmanuel, she should have no problem finding her way to the director's office, after you've dropped her off. We'll take care of her from there on, so no need to involve yourself any further. Understood?"

"What about the girl? You better not have …"

"The little one is quite comfortable and being well attended to, I assure you. Now, if you'll excuse me."

He then hung up. Some jerk, let me tell you.

For some reason I started feeling a bit nervous and sweaty, with my pulse even pounding. Traffic had turned pretty thick, too. I thought I'd gotten a good firm handle on the Duck throughout our entire trip over, but rounding those tight city corners seemed more of a hassle than it should've proved. Like that empty bathtub back at Twin Cedars, the RV felt bigger and unwieldy all of a sudden. I was really having to watch the side mirrors like never before, to make certain I'd cleared a curb. I wondered, why the difference?

Where had my self-control gone? This shouldn't have been happening, me faltering and fumbling at the last minute. It was almost as if Morton's voice had had an effect on me, like someone had slipped something into my drink. I glanced over at the cup of Orange Nehi in the holder on the dash, desperate to take a gulp and get the anecdote into my system to soothe my nerves.

"So, uh, North," Sweedee said. "I never did ask what you do. Care to fill me in?"

"Nothing special. Just seasonal stuff. There's a music group called the Dillards who hired me as a roadie. You know, loading gear, setting up equipment, doing the odd errand here and there, that kind of thing."

"But I see you writing sometimes. What, you're trying to become a novelist?"

"Songwriter. Sort of. I get ideas and scribble things down. Hopefully, one day I'll have a good one I can show to someone and get it performed or maybe even recorded, get a career going in that direction. It's a long shot, but it's always been my dream."

"Hm. Not a bad dream. When you get famous, tell them Sweedee Feathers was your main inspiration, a tenth Muse to your musical aspirations. I mean, I wouldn't want to leave you empty-handed, without some sort of compensation for hauling this old gal across the good old U S of A."

"Maybe the first hit I get," I replied, "I'll dedicate it to you."

I made that last turn, which now felt somehow not as awkward as the other ones had, and slid the Duck up against the curb. The place across the street was not what I'd envisioned for a museum. No old world facade, no, indeed. The epitome of space-age modernity, if nothing else.

"Okay, North," Sweedee said. "You've done your part. No need to wait on me anymore. Well, then. Here goes. Nice knowing you, kid."

She got up, exited the Duck, crossed the street and marched up a walkway toward that high-styled edifice of glass and concrete, like

she was going for a major job interview.

If you'd asked me, she'd gotten the job, that was a given. Now, it was only a matter of telling those clowns in there where to shove it … at least, that's what I was hoping she'd do, be herself, be the tough gal she'd always been.

Like that one painting of Daddy's she'd pulled out, *Hope Like a Tricycle*, fixing that one missing wheel. Or like that box of Pandora's, kept shut tight on that one remaining virtue. Which ever, I downed some Nehi while keeping my eyes and all bets on Sweedee the whole way up to the entrance.

41

Hanna

Babe, I was sure these were the bad people before. But it looks like Miss Kitty has got so much fancy stuff in her room, I can't be sure if she's all that bad or not. Rich people can't be bad people, can they?

And there she is, sitting behind that huge table that looks like a kitchen island. When we visited Mister Jordan's home that one time, Missus Jordan showed us theirs. Except theirs had a stone top with pots and pans hanging over it. This one has a wooden one, and shiny, too, but with books and papers all piled on it. No telling how much she paid for it. And there's a picture on the front of it. See there, Babe? It shows a bunch of men in the dark standing around and talking to another man who's in the light, about that woman on the ground, I guess. Is she hurt or something? Why aren't they trying to help her instead of talking to the man? I'm sure Mister Jack could tell us all about that one.

Looks like Miss Kitty's not a police woman anymore but has a dress on. She must have to work extra jobs to afford all her fancy things.

You're off duty now, ma'am?

"Pardon?" Miss Kitty is saying.

I mean, where are your police clothes? Did they let you off so you

could wait for Sweedee?

"Young lady, I am not a police officer. That was just a disguise, for your information. I am actually director of this museum, but I sometimes have to wear more than one hat, you see."

You have hats? But I've never seen you wear one.

"I have many hats. It's how I get people to do what I want. I got you to come with me, didn't I? Now that you're here, I don't have to wear that hat anymore."

Is that why Sweedee attacked you? She didn't like your hat?

"I … I don't follow what you're saying, dear. Miss Feathers has never … oh, yes, of course. There was that one time, when she was acting rather not herself. We had to send her to a hospital so she could get treatment. But she refused to cooperate and ran away. Now that she's returned, we can make certain she gets the proper treatment this time."

You have a lot of pretty pictures in here, and more out there. Mister Jack was showing me some really nice ones. But you have some nice ones, too. Why aren't these out there?

"These are from my private collection. They help to give a favorable atmosphere for me to work in."

At most fear? They help you to not be afraid?

Miss Kitty is laughing for some reason. "What a precocious little girl! Now, if you don't mind, just sit down over there until Miss Feathers arrives. As you can see, I have much work to do and don't have time for anymore of your silly questions."

Yes, ma'am.

Babe, I can see why Sweedee got sick and had to go to the hospital. Rich or not, this lady would make anyone sick, always smiling funny and making people do what she wants. And boring, too. That's probably why she keeps all these fancy things in here, so people can look at those and not be afflicted by her. Sweedee must've forgot to look at the pictures, and got so over-powered by Miss Kitty's yuckiness.

Sweedee wasn't to blame then, was she? She just couldn't help

herself. You know, she's a lot like me, like when I'm at school and Lizzy is picking on me and making me want to attack her, too. Mama says I need to keep my cool better. But sometimes I feel so hot and I want to get so mad. I think I can understand Sweedee a lot better now. After all, we're kin.

"Miss Gillespie?" There's a voice coming from Miss Kitty's phone that sounds like Jack's. "I'm sorry, ma'am. But she's here and she's already on her way in. I would've paged you sooner, but …"

"Quite alright, Jack. I'll handle this."

The door just opened, and there's Sweedee! Oh, Babe! She's here. And she has what looks like a present, maybe for Miss Kitty to make up for attacking her. Maybe she won't need those tweet'nunts after all.

For some reason, Miss Kitty hopped up and got behind her chair. "Why, Miss Feathers! You are a … that is, you're quite … spirited. Not like I expected … I mean, like I remember you from before."

"I've learned a thing or two," Sweedee's saying, "since I've been away. Had some extra training in time management. Lots of time and lots of training. You yourself could perhaps benefit from where I've been."

There's Jack at the door. He must know to stay outside so as not to get too near Miss Kitty's sick-making sweetness. Oh, he's looking at us now, Babe. And smiling and winking, too. He's such a sweet man.

"Well, then." Miss Kitty must have something stuck in her throat, she keeps trying to swallow and clear it so. "Seems you've come back to us, then. Unfortunately, I have to inform you, your position has been filled already. Oil well! So it goes, it goes. Therefore, I don't believe we'll really be needing your services anymore."

"Suits me," Sweedee's saying. "I hated the job anyway. Now, then. I've got what you want right here. Why not let the kid go?"

"Well, now. Just leave it right there on my desk, and I'll consider whether to let the little thing walk or not. After all, we

may still need her presence to ensure your compliance. You understand, don't you?"

"No, *you* don't understand. I said, let … the kid … freaking …!"

"*Yes, and why not?*"

Look, Babe. There's that man in the suit again, coming in another door. He's the one who called himself a doctor, Doctor Mordor or something. He must be the one Miss Kitty said would give Sweedee her tweet'nunts. Boy, after dealing with that sick woman, I'd need a doctor, too. Don't you think, Babe?

"Why not just let the child go?" the doctor's saying to Miss Kitty. "For you see, we now have exactly what we want. What use is there anymore in bait, when the fish are already jumping in the boat?"

"I … I guess I must concede then," Miss Kitty's saying. She must be feeling sick herself, breathing hard and shaking. "Jack, would you, uh, care to escort the young lady out?"

"Yes, ma'am. Hanna?"

I guess we have to go with Jack now, Babe. I hate leaving Sweedee alone with Miss Kitty. I wish I could take her with us. I don't want her getting sick again.

"And please close the door behind you," Miss Kitty is telling him. "We don't wish to be disturbed."

You know, Babe. Jack has warm hands. And he's real gentle, too. I can't help but think where I've seen him before. Do you?

"Now, then," I can hear the doctor saying. "It is such a shame, Miss Feathers. With poor Ventress no longer around, who is there left who'll even miss you? Even your own child has chosen to sacrifice you for the sake of hers."

Where are they going to take Sweedee, do you think? I hope it's not back to the hospital. I think Miss Kitty needs tweet'nunts more than Sweedee. I don't like the sound of things, Babe. They aren't going to hurt Sweedee, are they? Oh, I wish we could've stayed and maybe protected her. She came all that way just to meet us, and here we are leaving her alone with sick rich people.

I FEEL bad leaving Sweedee in there, but Jack is just doing what Miss Kitty wants him to, wearing another of her silly hats.

Oh, there's Mister Jordan. And Mama, too!

"Hanna!" Mama's so glad to see us, hugging us so hard. It's like she was afraid for us. But there was no worry, was there, Babe? Jack stayed with us the whole time.

"Baby, don't you ever wander off like that, you hear me?"

But they said you were okay with it, and that I would get to see Sweedee.

"Who told you that?"

Mister Jordan's going over and holding out his hand to Jack. "Clese Jordan. Could you fill us in on what happened."

Jack's taking it and telling him, "Miss Gillespie brought Hanna here and put her in my care. I assure you, there was no chance of any harm coming to her."

"Jack!" Mama's looking up at him now. "How … how could you allow them to do this with your own daughter?"

"What I want to know is," Jack's saying, coming and standing over us, "how could you have put our daughter in a position for this to happen? You of all people."

Mama looks like she's about to cry. "You're right. What a fool I've been all this time." Now, she's looking up at Mister Jordan.

I get it now, Babe. Jack is really Daddy. Why didn't I see it sooner? That's why he was so sweet to us. I just hope he can forgive Mama for letting us get in this pro-sizzun like we're in. But wait a minute …

Mama, we need to help her.

"Who, honey?"

Sweedee!

"Hanna, what are you saying?"

Jack … that is, Daddy is saying, "She means Miss Feathers who is in with Miss Gillespie right now. But I really don't know if she's

in any danger."

"You mean," Mister Jordan's asking him, "Miss Feathers is already here? I better go in and talk with …"

POW!

What was that, Babe? What was that loud noise? It's made Mister Jordan pull out his gun and run to see. Was that …? Oh, no! Sweedee! Oh, Babe! Where will she go now?

42

Chris

It was all I could do, sitting there in the Duck, hands on the wheel. And it was really ticking me off, too. I mean, I could've pulled out and not looked back, just like I'd wanted to that first day at Twin Cedars. If it hadn't been for Lynn and that slice of chocolate cake she'd been waving my way, I'd be sitting in my trailer right then with a cold beer in hand and wandering when my life was going to get started. Why could I never seem to just, you know, put things into gear and head out, like nothing back there mattered anymore? I mean, who did that kind of thing? Was Chris North that much of a sap? What had happened to the road warrior? Couldn't take his coffee straight and strong, could he? And forget about smoking, if he ever did light one up and least of all without a filter. He was no Sweedee Feathers.

I'd be smoking, alright, if I could've just gotten up enough nerve to turn around and head back to Birmingham.

But I didn't. I just kept sitting there like a dope. What was I waiting for? Allie had even told me how she herself knew just what she wanted in life, being that down-to-earth realist with the sweet smile and shapely legs and all that. Me? Yeah, my silly air-headed music of the road theory, which she couldn't grasp one bit of. I'd be ready for take-off, while she'd still be calculating the odds of

failure. Beats crazy Mosby dragging me off into the mountains. Now, there was someone to try and keep up with.

These were just some of the odds-and-ends I was contemplating, sitting there like a dunce in the driver's seat of the Duck and wondering what to do next.

But forget about wondering. I knew what I had to do.

On a made-up excuse of having to use the restroom—in case someone were wondering, that is—I headed toward the museum's entrance. As crazy as things had gone thus far, why not top it all off with another crazy antic? And speaking of crazy, guess who I happened to come upon outside, inspecting one of the flower beds?

"How'd you get here so quick?" I asked her.

"I know a few shortcuts here and there," Mosby replied. "I used to run errands through the city before I met you. Where are they keeping her, again?"

"Morton told me to send Sweedee to the director's office, wherever that is."

"Director's office, huh?" Mosby led the way inside. There was a building map right next to the elevator. That was Mosby, crazier and smarter than I'd ever thought to be.

"I would try this outer door here," she said, pointing to a spot near the top of the map, "but looks like an emergency exit, locked, no doubt." Then, running her finger part-way down, she continued, "Here's a room on the other side of the office, probably used for storage of some kind. Should do the trick, alright. Best not to make a frontal assault in this case. More of a flank maneuver would be in order, I'd say."

"But what if that one turns out to be locked, too?"

"We'll find out, won't we?"

We took the elevator to the second floor, where Mosby held me back while poking her head out and scanning the hallway first. There were a couple of boxes of copy paper on the floor next to the door she'd found.

"Bloke must be on break. My hunch is …" After she'd looked

both ways, the knob turned for her. “See, mate? Now we know.”

Inside the store room, Mosby scooted over to the other corner. The door there was already half opened, and I could hear voices on the other side, one of which I recognized as Sweedee’s.

“Cover me, mate,” Mosby whispered, “while I go and have us a look.” She then whipped out and held up her model 83 before slipping herself through the doorway.

I guessed by “cover me,” she meant to make sure no one else was in the area, which turned out to be not much of a problem since, obviously, we hadn’t yet encountered anyone in that part of the building. I was wondering why that was, until checking my phone’s time I realized it was their lunch hour. And what great timing, considering it’d mean a less complicated search and rescue operation. My main concern then was that Mister Jordan and Allie might’ve already rallied the cops and were on their way. If we could’ve just extracted both Sweedee and Hanna ahead of them and made it back to the Duck, …

POW!

A gun shot, from the inner office. My first thoughts were on Mosby. What if she’d fired first? No time to lose. Whipping open that door, I rushed in. Fool or not, I had to know if hope was still in the box.

43

Sweedee

Ruby, I don't know if this can reach you from here. Seems I've gotten myself in the middle of a pack of rats like I always seem to. But I'm not running this time. Do you see? Not running.

And there's that slithering snake of a doctor from the Institute, Doctor Morton. A little more grayish and wrinklish and haggardish than I last saw him. Yet, even those old snakes you still have to watch out for. Slow moving, but just as deadly, to the soul as to the body. But old Sweedee's not letting herself be as hypnotized as old mother Eve, not this old gal, no matter if he offered me a years supply of coffee and doughnuts—which is some mighty temptation, let me tell you.

"So then, Miss Feathers. Considering you left us last time without being properly discharged, I think it best we double your dosage—for your safety, you understand."

He's got his hand in his coat pocket and is moving toward me now. And old Kitty, the witch, there she comes around the desk. They're about to corner me. And there's nothing but the door behind me. Should I run? Should I fight? Where's that old beast when I need it? Still, I'm not backing down, not this time. I've got to face it like the woman the Big Guy made me, square and true. Babs always told me: *Don't let them see you sweat, girl. You've got to*

make them sweat.

But who's that other gent over there? Where'd he come from? Looks a lot like Vent, doesn't he? Smiling like him, too. He's opening that other door. A way out? There's a light streaming in from the outside. Could it be? Could this be it? Guess it's time for old Sweedee's exit then from this crummy world. I'll be seeing you real soon, Ruby. Be home before you know it, baby. They've got me now. Rather, they've got Luke's Mary. Who am I to keep it from them?

Best to close my eyes at this point. Never could stand the sight of blood. Take it, Sweedee! Take it like a woman. It won't hurt anymore. No more. You'll see. Won't hurt …

POW!

Oh, I'm falling! … falling! ….. falling! …….. Ow! Ooh!

So, where are they now? Standing over my lifeless corpse? Gloating, even? They must be feeling pretty good about getting the better of old Sweedee. I'll open my eyes, just to have one last look at those two ugly faces.

What the hey! Where'd they go? And what's this I see? A painting, on some wood paneling? It's … it's a Rembrandt. Of all the things I thought I'd never see, a Rembrandt on the other side. And I know this one—*Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*. One of his masterpieces, of light and shadow. *Chiaroscuro*, it's called. It has all those bigwigs standing over there in the dark spots, with the Lord himself stage-center in the light from above. And there's the woman on her knees, having been caught in the act and being presented for the Lord's judgment. On her knees, just like me. Of course, those hypocrites could've stoned her on the spot. Instead, they were setting a trap for the Big Guy's boy, seeing if he'd be crazy enough to pardon this old gal, make himself just like the Big Guy. But then, he went and wrote their names in the dirt, kicking it back in their smug faces. Bet that taught them a lesson. Yeah, just

like those thugs back at the Institute, hating someone for going and doing something good for a change, despising them for trying to do what the Big Guy would've.

But wait! There's a history behind this one. You see, Ruby, this particular Rembrandt wound up in some aristocrat's collection, along with a bunch of other originals. The British government, they wanted to establish a national gallery to enrich the public's taste for art, and talked the fella into donating his collection as a starter.

I see now. This whole episode of my life has been about nothing but preserving art. That was my calling, back then when I'd went looking to start my own career in the art world. I'd almost forgotten it then, too, especially with Miss Kitty and her wily ways trying to knock me down and make me think I wasn't good enough. I could've done some serious work, too, if only …

Wait a minute! That painting. It's on the front of Kitty's desk. And how about that smiling gent I saw earlier? Where'd he go? The door over there is still swung open, with sunlight streaming from outside. Am I really there, on the other side? Or am I still here, on this side? Either way, I know now which side of the throne I'll be standing on, if the Big Guy has indeed gone and given me another chance. Perhaps he has.

I'm still holding Luke's Mary, aren't I? That's a start, at least. They're not getting this one, not over my …

Ruby, baby. I remember now. I know what I'm doing here now, what I was put here for. Just like with Luke's Mary, devotion to a cause.

Love back at ya, Big G!

44

Chris

The first time I ever saw Sherry Mosby, she was clowning around with some stocky biker dude in a Black Sabbath t-shirt. I was into my second or third week of that brief stretch of tending bar at Mott's. About an hour later, I turned around and there she sat across the bar, a fist propping up one cheek, just studying me. She ordered a beer but hardly touched the thing, the whole time spent asking the usual questions: Where was I from? What did I do? Why didn't I have a girlfriend? After I'd filled in the blanks with the usual answers, she then said, "Huh!" left the bottle sitting there, and walked over to shoot pool with a couple of dudes and another chick, till they all eventually filed out the door.

The second time was when I'd gotten back from my first tour with the Dillards, beat as heck, and found her relaxing on the front steps of my trailer. She seemed to me to be … aimless, like a ship adrift at sea—so unlike the tough bad-ass chick I'd first taken her for. We sat on my couch and talked into the night, before she went and crashed in my bed. Trying to be the gentleman that I hoped I'd become, I took to the couch. The next morning, she was up and headed out the door, thanking me and saying how she'd never slept better than that in all her life. In due time, I found her gravitating toward me, like she'd found her anchor, which was probably why

she got so pissed at me that morning I was getting ready to head back home for Daddy's funeral. In other words, she must've felt like I was cutting her loose. And when she had me up against the wall back at that barbecue place, she must've further assumed I'd gone and become the anchor for another's ship, which was partly true, fool that I was to think Allie was the one I'd be sailing with from then on. What a dope!

If I've spent a considerable amount of verbiage on Mosby, that's not meant to divert anyone's attention from the story, mind you. I just wanted to say a little something about this rogue biker chick I'd gotten myself tangled up with, and how, unlike Sweedee Feathers whose toughness was just who she was, Sherry Mosby's had proven nothing more than a cover. And that was the real reason I'd rushed into that office at the sound of the gun firing. See, Mosby had claimed to have used her model 83 for nothing more than tin-can targeting and taking out nasty critters like rabid dogs and snakes down under. She had never and would never shoot another human being, unless her life depended on it. For if she had ever been made to do so, I was certain, it would've broken her spirit. Such a terrible image had flashed before my mind, making me whip that door open. And the possibility scared the crap out of me.

Once I'd entered, though, there stood Mosby, her back to me and the model 83 pointed at the ceiling. Bits of debris were on the floor from where one of the big ceiling tiles had been blown to pieces. No one else was in the room, despite my having heard voices just a few minutes before. But then, Sweedee's head popped up over the desk, eyes blinking and head pivoting.

"Where'd they go?" Sweedee muttered.

"Not really sure, luv," Mosby replied, lowering the pistol. "All I did was show them my model 83, and they couldn't get out of here quick enough. Headed for that exit over there. Some emergency! Seems the bloke even forgot his medicine, too." She then picked up a syringe from the floor and tossed the thing into a waste basket.

The front door to the office then flung open, and there stood

Mister Jordan wielding his own revolver.

Mosby laid her 83 on the desk and backed away, holding her hands out.

Mister Jordan looked around, holstered his, then walked over to help Sweedee up.

Mosby turned around, seemed startled to see me standing there, then threw her arms around my neck really tight. I reciprocated by hugging her waste, just as relieved at finding no dead bodies but only this one warm body left quivering and begging for me to hold it. She had always smelled of spearmint, and I was taking in a good whiff of it then.

"You hear me good, Chris North!" Mosby whispered hard into my ear. "Don't you ever make me walk away like that again."

"Even if I just want to get a good look at that fine ass of yours?" Of course, my hand was starting to work its way down.

She growled and said, "Keep those filthy paws of yours where I can see them, mate. You know what I mean."

"I was just joking."

"Better not be, not after I get you alone this evening, you sicko."

Looking over and seeing both Sweedee and Mister Jordan staring at us, I loosened my hold on Mosby, as she did hers. Just in the nick of time, too, because there appeared Allie in the doorway, with a rather frightful look stuck to her cute face.

Sweedee reached down and picked up that bundle she'd been toting this whole time—ready to tote it some more, it seemed. She then stuck a cigarette between her lips and started to light it. But after making eye-contact with me, she pocketed the lighter, took out the unlit cigarette, and twirled it my way … with a quirky smile, no less. Perhaps as a farewell gesture? Regardless, more than anything, that gesture served to mark the abrupt end to my brief but arduous journey with Sweedee Feathers. No goodbyes, no thanks, no regrets, leaving me with only the implication of a possibility that it had, perhaps, not been all for nothing.

I'D ALREADY SEEN Allie step aside, once Sweedee had reached the office door. But then the woman with the bundle just hugged it even closer, turned and kept going. After we were all in the outer office, I started to say something to Allie, but her attention remained fixed on Sweedee.

Some dude was sitting on a desk near the outer door, holding Hanna by the shoulders.

Sweedee reached over as she passed and petted the girl's head.

"Wait!" Allie said, stepping forward. "You mean you're just going to walk away again, like before?"

Sweedee stopped, hunched like she was exhausted. Slipping the cigarette from her mouth, and struggling with each breath, she said, "I, uh,…. I'm ….. I'm sss… I'm *sorry*, okay?! There. Said it, didn't I? Whew! Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Allie moved closer and stood gazing down on the hunched woman in blue.

For a moment, Sweedee's body seemed to have shrunken several inches.

"You're sorry?" Allie said, hands on hips. "Just … *sorry*? Heh! That's all you have to say … to your own daughter?"

It was like watching a parent lecturing her child, which made me feel sorry for the "child".

Sweedee shrugged and replied, "It's what I've always wanted to say, but couldn't. Now, it's all I can say. Just … *sorry*, that's all." She stepped through the door and stood hunched in the hallway, not once turning around, still hugging that bundle.

Allie threw her hands up and said, "You know, I really must be your daughter then. Turns out, I've been just as much a fool as you were, if you can believe that." She then looked over at Hanna and sighed. "And that's why … I'm letting you go this time. But never again, you hear me?"

By now, Drew had appeared in the hallway and had his hand on

Sweedee.

Allie just stood there, sniffling, head bowed, fists clinched, body quivering.

Hanna walked over and touched her mother's hand.

Pulling the girl close to her, Allie continued, "But you know what? I've gotta thank you. Yes, thank you, Sweedee Feathers. If nothing else, you've given me … gave me, rather … *my* daughter."

Drew put an arm around Sweedee and led her away.

The dude I'd seen with Hanna then went over and held close a whimpering Allie.

Seeing the three of them huddled together like that, I whispered to Mister Jordan, "Who's the dude?"

"That's Jack," he whispered back. "Allie's husband."

"Really?" Scratching my head, I added, "Guess that means …"

Mosby nudged me and said, "Means you've been dumped, mate. How's it feel?"

To be honest, I felt … relieved. How could a dude like me have let his life get so screwed up in the first place?—something even Sweedee had been trying to get into that screwed-up brain of mine. Score one for the Doughnut Queen!

I then asked Mister Jordan, "So, no police?"

"We were headed that way," he said, "until Allie got a call from Jack. For once, she changed my mind and gave me a reason to trust her. Women do that sometimes." He then patted my shoulder and left the office.

Hanna wave to him as he walked out, then looked around and grinned at both me and Mosby.

Mosby gave the girl a solid thumb's up, to which Hanna responded with a thumb's up herself.

"He's right, you know," Mosby said, steering me toward the doorway. "I'll have yours changed yet, you lunk."

I had to laugh at that one on the way out. "Now, that I've gotta see."

It was around this time that some of the office workers for the

museum were returning from their lunch break, everyone giving strange looks at Mosby and me as we passed them in the hallway.

°

LATER INSIDE THE DUCK, I found Sweedee's book left lying open on the bed. I picked it up and sat down to give it a quick read. Where it had been opened, it told this story about some dude who'd been blind since birth, while this other dude had come along and rubbed clay in the other's eyes and said to him to go and wash it out. When the first dude did so, he could see like never before.

This got me to thinking. All his life, the blind dude, though he'd never seen a single thing in his life, just needed the junk washed from his eyes to discover that things were not as obscure as he'd once thought.

I could almost hear Sweedee telling me, "See, North? Told you the Big Guy had his hand on you, and you didn't even know it. You just needed to stop being such a wimp and be a man for a change, to where he could use you."

Mosby came in and stood over me, arms crossed and a bit inquisitive.

I closed the book and said, "You know, I was thinking about taking a ride up into the mountains, do a little house hunting. Of course, I have no idea where that notion came from."

Her expression went blank for a moment. Then she said, "You don't say! Well, then. I see my woo-woo was spot on, just like always. How about them apples, mate!"

°

NOW, to wrap things up on my end, if anyone's still wondering whatever happened to Daddy's paintings, the story goes like this. They were still left sitting in Vent Junior's office. And here's the real kicker. It turned out that Daddy's work was actually a cover. If

you peeled back the canvas of one of his, underneath was another painting, each one a valuable piece which had been stolen from that art museum. I could hear Sweedee saying, “Knew it all along, kid.”

Also, what I learned later from Mister Jordan was that it had actually been Wayne’s stupid idea to drop me and Sweedee off in Laurel and take the paintings and try selling them himself and get rich. What a loser, huh?

And there it is, the story behind the hit single, “The Never-ending Road,” which you’re now free to interpret any which way you like. My take? Well, it seems to me that you really don’t get to know much about yourself, till you discover some of what you’re capable of. To see how far the road goes, before the distance starts blurring the details, if that makes any sense. Perhaps it even comes down to knowing where we come from, as much as where we’re headed. As far as I’m concerned, as long as there’s still some sort of horizon left over there for me to set my sights on, I’ll keep on driving that road … till it never ends.

45

Sweedee

1:24 PM SAT

Well, Ruby, I hate to admit it, but the kid was right—for once, that is. Think, back there in that little graveyard, when we were headed to see big bro about Vent's art work. He figured then those were just a bunch of nobodies thrown out to sleep on a corner, because there were no names on the markers. You see, without a name, you're nobody in this world. And there are those whose main job it is to make sure you understand that real good—Morton and Kitty being two of them. A few minutes later, and old Sweedee would've been out for the count, had that tough girlfriend of North's not blown a hole in the roof and scared off the rascals.

So, here's one last posterior note before I sign off, honey. Doesn't matter who you are, or think you are, when your number's up, it's "*adios, Da Vinci!*" You're as good and gone as a candy wrapper or a cigarette butt, all I can tell you. Then, they scoop up the trash and shovel it where the trash belongs, marker or no. That's why you have to stay on the Big Guy's good side. See, he always remembers his own, 'cause he's eternal. With him, you never have to worry about becoming a nobody, no matter what the clowns try to make you think.

To put it bluntly, I started out on this journey thinking I'd make those bozos pay for what they'd done. But as it turned out, they were ready to make your old mom pay for it instead. But then, the Big Guy stepped in and said, "This one's on me, gal." And that's because he's extra generous, you see, something people need to learn. Even when you're down and out, the Big Guy's still got plenty of room reserved for you. But enough preaching.

Well, honey, guess this is goodbye then. Or hello, with that other one showing up in your place. Never meant to forget you, you know that, don't you? Not for all the coffee and doughnuts in the freaking universe. Just wish I could convince this other one. Don't know if she'll come around looking for me again, but if she's ever tempted to, well … guess I'll have to give her her due. Just wish she hadn't brought her kid along and got my heart all mixed up. Still, bright kid. I mean, you see who she takes after, don't you?

Yeah, enough said. Signing off, Ruby honey. Love ya. Be sweet. Oh, and Drew here says hey to you, too. He's driving me home, by the by. Home! Sweetest tune I've ever sang to.

"So, you have that little gadget there to speak to your young'un, is it?"

Yeah, the thing's come in real handy for getting some stuff off my rear-end. Good therapy. I just push this little button right here and spill my guts. It keeps everything safe and doesn't let anything get away.

"That little button right there?"

Yeah, this one I've got my thumb on.

"Sorry, luv. I'm thinking that's the play button there. The record button's the little red one under it."

You sure about that? Hm. Well. If that's the case, then … So it goes. So it goes. And out the window it goes. Should've wrote a book, I tell you …..

46

Hanna

SEP 12 2118 10:19:32 AM

Is this app even working? Well, of course it is. I made sure to tap the right button this time, didn't I? The red dot by the REC in the corner is blinking, so that must mean it's on. Right? Better be.

Okay, Mama. I'm here at Bryn Mawr College way up here in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. All the buildings here are all really old but really beautiful. This one is called the Old Library and it's where the Art Department is located. Looks like an old English castle, doesn't it? Of course, I've never been to England, silly me, so what would I know about their castles. Anyway, I looked on the internet and found out this was where Sweedee had gone to graduate school and majored in art history, around about, oh … sometime in the 1970's, I believe.

I hope you understand why I'm using my phone to make this video. It's because you said you didn't know much about where your family came from, being adopted and all. So, I thought I'd do a little family history research for you—or rather, a little of the life and times of Sweedee Feathers, which is about the same thing. Next, I'm going over to West Chester where Sweedee grew up.

SEP 12 2118 1:05:20 AM

Here I am in West Chester. I went to city hall and looked up where Sweedee's parents used to live. They were James and Mary Feathers and lived in this house I'm showing you, on North Church Street. It's a duplex, and the family lived in the left half. Sweedee was their only child, it seems. Kind of quaint, don't you think?

I'm going to stay the night in Harrisburg then hit I-81 in the morning and drive back down to Atlanta. I'll talk to you then.

SEP 13 2018 11:01:15 AM

Okay, Mama. I'm back in Atlanta and over here at Emmanuel Museum of Fine Art. This is where Sweedee worked for a short time after graduating Bryn Mawr. I remember the first time I came here —brought here rather, by that woman who called herself Miss Kitty. Remember that? It's also where Daddy worked, too, although at the time I didn't recognize him at first. He showed me around the place. The architecture's gorgeous, but I guess I much prefer the old style like that back at Bryn Mawr.

Anyway, from what I've gathered, about Miss Kitty and that doctor fellow she was seeing, it seems they were eventually arrested and sent to prison on various charges. The doctor died while there, but Miss Kitty got out on parole and worked as a cashier at a superstore before they caught her shoplifting and reselling merchandise. Then, she did some more time and wound up in a nursing home where she bilked some of the residents out of their retirement. But before they could send her back, she fell down some stairs and died soon after. Sad case. Sad woman.

Anyway, moving on.

SEP 13 2018 1:58:50 PM

I'm in Birmingham now. Here's a shot of Mister Chris' old trailer. You remember it, don't you? Not much to look at now. Seems

nobody's lived in it anymore. Chris and Miss Mosby got married and moved to a place north of here and had two really adorable children. I met them a few years ago, when they came to visit Sweedee. I'd go up to their house, but they're on vacation down in Gulf Shores at moment.

Mister Chris took the royalties he made from his song and invested it in a landscaping business run by Miss Mosby. They're doing pretty good, from what I've been told. Miss Mosby even still rides her Harley on weekends. Silly me, didn't know what a "chopper" was back when I was little. Thought it was something you cut up things with. She let me ride with her one time. I was a bit nervous, but just held onto her. It was so cool, flying down the highway, the pavement just inches away from my feet. Thrilling, to say the least.

I realize none of this has much to do with Sweedee, but I thought you might like to know what became of those two. Well, as always, moving on.

SEP 13 2018 5:00:08 PM

And here I am at Sweedee's home near Laurel. You remember, after Mister Drew passed away, Stan and I went to live with her. He'd just started driving a semi then, and him and Sweedee became the best of friends. He'd even take her for a ride in his rig, whenever she wanted to "stretch her legs", as she put it. She just loved that. Then, when he was home, they'd sit around and talk for hours.

Well, I'm going down later to Laurel to that barbecue place for supper then come back and stay the night. We put the place up for sale after she passed away. Won't be the same without her here anymore. Stan's on a run up to Illinois, so it's just me in my minivan. With the kids visiting you, I just couldn't sit around the house and do nothing on my time off. Had to come back one more time and reminisce a bit. Still can't believe she's gone. But, oh well. Just have to get used to it, that's all.

I was so thrilled when you finally came to see her that one time. I know she acted kind of stand-offish, and you felt awkward and all. But after you left, Stan told me that Sweedee told him she wanted you to have something after she was gone. I'm inside the house now, and this is her bedroom. It's over here on her desk. A notebook, titled, *The Saga of Susan*. Oh, Mama! It's her story, and she wanted you to have it. I'll bring it over when I get back. And there's a note attached. It reads … oh, Mama! It says, "To my little one. Your old mom is still kicking. And don't forget it."

Sorry, I've got to …

SEP 14 2018 7:33:15 PM

Morning, Mama! Sorry about last night. Here I am having coffee in Sweedee's kitchen. I'm getting ready to head out in a little bit, but there's something I have to tell you first. Remember when you came to see her, and how you told me afterwards how much you detested the fact that Sweedee still smoked, after all those years?

That day, when you were outside and getting ready to leave, you said, "Why can't she see what she's doing to herself?" I could tell then how it was really bothering you, how much you really cared for her, though you had said nothing while visiting. But I think she heard you, and I'll tell you why.

The next morning, I was having coffee with her, and as usual Sweedee lit up one of her cigarettes—I mean, one of those really strong unfiltered kind, too. The smell was awful. But I'd never said anything about it before, not wanting to hurt her feelings. I was feeling really cranky myself that morning, because Stan was away, and the baby had kept me awake most of the night, and how I wished he'd been there to take her so I could get some sleep. So that morning, I had the gall to go and ask Sweedee for a cigarette. I mean, I didn't care. I was in that bad a mood. And you know what she did? She looked at that cigarette in her hand, then hard at me and said really loud, "No!" She then put it out, and I swear, after

that morning, I never saw her light up another. Funny, on the next grocery list, she wanted me to pick up a big bag of lollipops. From then on, she sucked on nothing but lollipops and kept a bag of them with her till the day she died. Can you believe it?

SEP 14 2018 1:02:15 PM

Okay, Mama. Here I am at Reagan's Corner in Mississippi. This is where you said you first met Mister Chris. It was also where I first met Sweedee, though I didn't know it was her at the time. I'll never forget how proud she was of her "art work" as she called it, those decals she'd stuck on the outside of the old Duck. Wonder whatever happen to that thing. Have to ask Mister Chris when I see him again.

I'm getting some gas and heading down to Baton Rouge to visit with the North's. Miss Lynn invited me, even said I could stay the night. From there I'm going to head up to Twin Cedars before heading back home. Catch you then.

SEP 15 2018 9:23:23 AM

And here I am, finally. Twin Cedars. I've never been here before. Mister Chris said it was the family camp, and he remembers all the good times they spent here. Real quiet place, too.

There's his daddy's grave. He told the story of how the gravediggers were using a backhoe and it broke down, leaving the grave open for a while. Ugh! Kind of creepy. But kind of funny at the same time. It's covered over now, of course, with a nice border of flowers.

Miss Lynn told me how they still come up here during the summer, so their kids can fish and her and her husband can relax. He became a state Representative, you know, after he sold the family business which wasn't doing so well. It was that car place we went to with Mister Jordan. I remember thinking Miss Lynn was

Sweedee. Wasn't that silly?

She said they had to return those paintings stolen from the museum, but kept old Mister Vent's paintings, some of which she showed me. He was really good. Sweedee thought so, too. There was one Sweedee kept in her bedroom, which she called, *Hope Like a Tricycle*. It seemed really special to her. Oh, and there was one other hanging next to it, but wasn't Mister Vent's. It looked really old. When I asked her about it one time, she just smiled at me and said how happy she was that I'd come to stay with her. I always wondered what the story was behind that one.

Well, I'm walking up the drive now. There's the old shed that looks like a barn. Miss Lynn still remembers how they almost tore it up looking for shovels to cover old Mister Vent's grave. And how her and Mister Chris were held at gunpoint by one of the thugs Mister Vent worked with.

Here are the two cedars the place is named for. My, they're big! And shady, too. I'm just going to sit on the steps and cool off. It's been rather hot today, but a nice breeze is blowing right now. I can see why Mister Chris liked coming out here. The place is so peaceful, far removed from the world.

"Why, hello there, Miss Sweedee!"

Oh! Sorry, sir. I didn't hear you come up.

"Oh, I'm sorry, miss. I thought you was somebody else. You look just like her though. Except she used to always wear her sleep clothes, when I seen her."

You knew Sweedee Feathers?

"Yes ma'am. Oh, by the way, I'm Rufus. I keep up the place for the North's. Didn't mean to startle you. You sure do remind me a lot of Miss Sweedee."

Well, she was my grandmother. I'm Hanna.

"Well, Miss Hanna. Nice to meet you. I'm just out here to cut the grass before heading home."

Hope you don't mind my recording you. Could you tell me about Sweedee?

“Yes ma’am. Miss Sweedee was a one of a kind. Nicest lady I met. Why, when I was out here cutting the grass, she’d come over with a big cold glass of something, and we’d go sit in the shade and talk for no telling how long. And smart, too. I never knew a woman who knowed so much. She told me how she’d had a hard life and how Mister Vent—that’s his grave over there, you see—Mister Vent he took her in and gave her that house next door. After he up and passed, well, didn’t see no more of her. How is she these days?”

Sad to say, but Sweedee passed away a few weeks back.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear. Yes, ma’am, she was a mighty good gal. And a fine Christian, too. That woman really knew her Bible. I knows the Lord has a good place for her up there now. You planning on moving here?”

Uh, no. I’m just traveling and making a record of Sweedee’s life for my Mama.

“I never knew Miss Sweedee had any more children. She told me her one child died young.”

Well, actually that one lived. That’s my Mama. It wasn’t till years later that they met again. But, sad to say, they really didn’t get along. So, I wanted to show Mama where Sweedee came from, you know, so she’d know where *she* came from.

“My, that’s so thoughtful of you. Everybody needs to know where they come from. As my Daddy used to say, it’s the only way to know where you’re headed in this life, and the next, I might add. Well, I need to get busy with the mowing now. It was so good talking with you. Reminded me of the good times I had with Miss Sweedee. You take care now. And thank you, Miss …”

Hanna.

“Miss Hanna. Yes, indeed. You have a safe trip back home.”

Thank you, Mister Rufus. Thank you so much.

See, Mama? Someone who really knew Sweedee. She was an extra special person after all. And you are, too. I love you, Mama!

Well, I guess I’ll get going now. I’ll see you when I see you.

Wow! Those clouds up there are so big and puffy and white. Sort

of reminds me of how, when I was little, I used to believe angels lived up on top of those clouds. Remember? Funny. I even carried around with me that stuffed toy I had, the one I called Babe. Wonder what ever happened to him, whether he made it back to the North Pole or … Oh, silly me!

Time to say so long to Twin Cedars then. Hope you've enjoyed this little video record I put together for you.

Hm, I wonder what that is over there. Sorry, Mama. It just sticks out in the grass, I couldn't help but notice. Let's go see. It's something blue, alright, which is odd. Oh, it's just a woman's slipper. Wonder what it's doing out here …

Wait a minute! I seem to remember Sweedee wearing blue fuzzy slippers. She had several pair.

There's that big white puffy cloud up there. And here's this slipper.

Oh, but silly me. Although … no, that's just too silly.

Still … Up there? Down here? Up there, huh? Hmmm …

Could it be?

The Never-ending Road

(Chris' Song)

Somewhere over yonder,
somewhere over there.
Up that hill then down the other,
there's just one more mile to go
but we don't know where.

Wednesday, the road winds westward.
Sunday, it'll slip on south.
Monday means more miles to measure.
But thank God it's Friday night,
'cause we're just pulling out.

CHORUS 1

What we long for is a place we've never been.
What we look for is a place we'll never go.
We may never find a place we can call our own,
but we're always at home out driving along
On this never-ending road.

Somewhere there is true love,
true love we can feel.
Some fine day, well, we may find it,
but till then we'll just feel
the hum of the turning wheels.

Somewhere ‘round the corner,
someone, we are told,
waits for us to find them,
but they’ll have to wait a little longer
till we’re back on the road.

CHORUS 2

What we long for is a face we’ve never seen.
What we look for is a name we’ll never know.
We may never find the one we are looking for,
‘cause we’re stuck in between
two cushions and a dream
on this never-ending road.

Never-ending road, never-ending road,
it’s a never-ending road.

Somewhere in the distance,
up ahead, ‘round the bend,
one way or another
we’ll just keep on driving this road
till it never ends.

CHORUS 3

What we long for is a trace of our childhood’s laughter.
What we live for is a taste of the sweet hereafter.
We may never find the answers to all our prayers,
but we’ll keep it in gear
till we find them out here
on this never-ending road.

Never-ending road, never-ending road,
it's a never-ending road.

Yee - Haw !!!

About the Author

FRED BICKHAM is the author of two novels, *Occasional Alice's* and *Jenneway's Pond*, the novella *Peninsula*, several short stories and two collections of essays. Fred was born and raised in Louisiana, where he continues to live with his dog and two cats.